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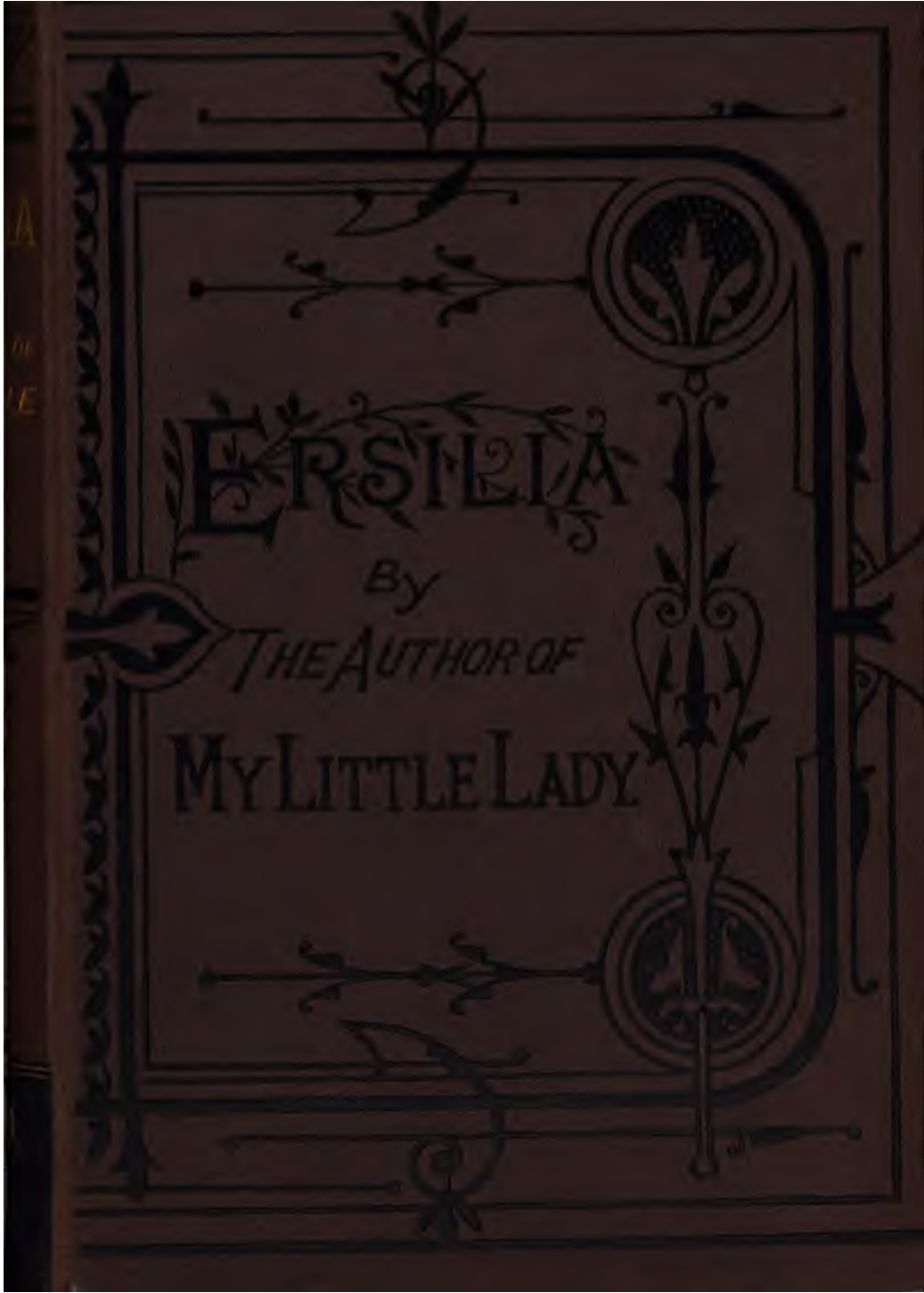
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ERSILIA

By

THE AUTHOR OF

MY LITTLE LADY



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ERSILIA.

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VOL. II.

ERSILIA.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF
“MY LITTLE LADY.”

“O fearful meditation! where, alack,
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
O none, unless this miracle have might,
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.”

SHAKESPEARE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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ERSILIA.

CHAPTER I.

RETURN.

IT was on a bright afternoon, towards the end of October that Humphrey first saw Ersilia again. She had been four days in Paris and he had already called twice without seeing her; but being told by Mr. Fleming that she would certainly be at home this afternoon, he started to make a third attempt.

The apartment occupied by the Princess Zaraikine was in a house that had

belonged to Monsieur de Florian, and which many years ago, during the life time of his parents, had been entirely inhabited by members of his own family. But these were long since dead or dispersed, and Monsieur de Florian, living chiefly abroad, had reserved for himself only the first floor, letting the remainder in apartments. It was a big old house in the Rue ——, near the upper end of the Chaussée d'Antin, standing amongst other houses that had a newer and fresher air than itself. (It no longer exists—only the other day I witnessed its overthrow and disappearance before modern improvement.) The great *porte-cochère* led into a lofty, dark, unevenly paved passage running beneath the front of the house to the court-yard beyond. At the entrance a clatter of voices might be heard from behind the red-curtained glass door of the porter's lodge; at the other end, a wide staircase with dimly polished steps and a

heavy balustrade led upwards through the house. On the first landing, two entrance-doors faced each other on either side of the window looking on to the courtyard, and led respectively to the apartments occupied by the Princess Zaraikine and by Mademoiselle de Brisac.

Ersilia was at home, and Humphrey was shown into a large, dim salon full of worn and faded furniture. M. de Florian had cared too little for his Paris home to spend much money on its adornment, and the chairs and tables dated probably from the time of his own marriage, some forty years before. Only a wood-fire blazing on the wide hearth and shining in tall narrow mirrors set in recesses round the room, and the lights reflected from the gold backgrounds of one or two pictures by early Italian painters on the walls, made a sudden brightness here and there. A door at one end stood open and showed the dining-room beyond, a cheerful room

panelled with light oak and full of afternoon sunshine, a glass cupboard with china in one corner, and large windows looking out upon the yellowing trees waving in the courtyard.

Another door opened, and Ersilia was in the room, her hands held out in sweet and cordial welcome.

"I was sorry to miss you when you called before, Humphrey," she said, "but I have been almost constantly out since our return to Paris. Aunt Mathilde has been refurnishing her apartment—you know she has her own rooms on the other side of the house—and that has given us a great deal to do. It was very good of you to come so soon."

"It has seemed a long time to me," he answered.

She looked at him with an expression, half anxious, half wistful, in her eyes, before which his own sank. Who was he, the lad had asked himself many times

during these last few weeks, that through his rashness and want of self-command he should have been the cause of one moments' uneasiness or pain to this sweet lady?

"Let us come into the library," she said, "I have been working there all day; it is the room I like best to sit in. Old Lebrun is there, he came from La Chênaie this morning; but we have just finished our business together, and he will be gone directly."

Humphrey followed her into the adjoining room. A fire was burning here also, but the window was open, letting in the fresh afternoon air, and an echo, as it were, of the departed summer in the vague street noises. There were some late roses, a tall china jar, and a litter of leaves and petals on a little table near the window, and Ersilia's embroidery frame stood in a corner by the fire; but it was a room of books and bronzes and marbles. Round

the upper part of the walls, beneath the ceiling, ran a broad shelf on which were arranged busts, alternating with antique helmets and jars of red and black pottery; below, bookcases lined two sides of the room and filled the recesses on either side of the window, and here and there, on a bracket or stand, some object of special value stood out in dark or pale relief against the dull green walls. There were some framed drawings above the mantel-piece; a leather table covered with books and papers stood in front of the window, and an open bureau on one side of the fire place.

A small shrewd-looking old man with white hair and keen black eyes was seated at the table tying up papers. He rose as Ersilia came in, buttoned up his coat, and stood waiting with his hat in his hand, as though ready to depart.

"You are in a hurry to go, Lebrun," said Ersilia, "and I will not detain you

longer. I think I have said all that is necessary, and you will let me know how the work goes on, and whether the families Guérin and Dubois are satisfied with their new cottages."

"Madame should receive constant reports," the old man said bowing.

"I hope to be at La Chênaie again early in the new year," Ersilia went on, "by that time no doubt everything will be completed. And you are not to forget," she said, smiling, "that you are to allow me to begin my new library in the spring."

"I, Madame? What have I to do with it? Madame may build a hundred libraries if she likes; there is money enough for everything, if that were all. I know nothing about books, and heads, and pictures," with a disdainful glance round the room, "but I know where an ear of corn is the fullest, and when a man makes a wry face without any tears behind it, and

that is my notion of managing an estate. There is money enough, but if we are to have schools, and lectures, and a hundred things that no one ever heard of before, and the people don't like them, and Monsieur le Curé takes to preaching against them, things will not go very smoothly."

"My good Lebrun, I am afraid of nobody's preaching but your own," answered Ersilia, unable to help laughing, "Monsieur le Curé, I am sure, will interfere with nothing that I may wish to do."

"Madame has won everyone's heart, and can do what she pleases, I know that very well," answered Lebrun, shrugging his shoulders, "the people have been as happy as possible hitherto in living and dying as their fathers did before them, but if Madame thinks she can make them any happier, there is nothing more to be said." He gathered up his papers, and

still shrugging his shoulders, left the room.

"Has the fever quite disappeared?" said Humphrey.

"I hope so, there have been no new cases for a fortnight," said Ersilia. "I hope there is no danger of its reappearing. A pond at the lower end of the village is being drained, and two of the cottages have been pulled down, but there are others that only want repairing, and I am glad of that, for the people are attached to their old homes."

It was not till long afterwards that Humphrey learned that immediately on her arrival at La Chênaie, Ersilia had turned the château into a hospital, and with the aid of a *sœur de charité* had herself watched and tended the sick people day and night.

"Sit down, Humphrey," she said, presently, "whilst I finish arranging my flowers. They came from La Chênaie this

morning. We have quantities of roses in the garden there, and Lebrun brought me a great basketful. He is a kind old man at heart, and always likes to do what he thinks will give me pleasure, though he has such a love of contradiction that he cannot help in the first instance opposing anything that is proposed."

She talked on as though to cover Humphrey's silence, for he had hardly spoken since he came, and stood now leaning against the mantelpiece watching Ersilia with her roses. She was thinner, he thought, than when he had last seen her; her cheeks were always pale, and she was tired now with a long morning's work, but yet he felt that some nameless change had passed over her, giving new depth and meaning to her beauty—the mystery of a hidden joy seemed to be held in the depths of her grey eyes, to rest on the pure and tender curves of her sweet lips.

He roused himself at last, however, and

with an instinctive avoidance of anything personal, "That is a fine cast," he said. "Were all these casts and bronzes collected by M. de Florian?"

"Yes," Ersilia answered, "he purchased most of these many years ago; they are amongst my early childish recollections in the days when I used to come to Paris for a month or two every year. That is why I like this room so much. My uncle always sat here, and liked to have me with him. I used to learn my lessons and bring my dolls in here. That helmet he brought with him from Marathon, one year that we were in Greece together," she added, going up to where Humphrey was standing; "he had a separate memory attached to each."

"And these are the things that you wish to place in your new library at La Chênaie?" said Humphrey.

"These and some others which are still in the packing-cases in which they came

from Rome; also some old china and pictures which are already at La Chênaie. It was the dream of my uncle's life," she said, "to collect all his scattered collections into one museum; all his purchases were made to that end, but he died without having even begun it."

"That is dreadful," said Humphrey; "it must be so terribly sad for a man to see his life slip from him without his having accomplished what he most cared for."

"I don't think my uncle felt it so," she answered; "his was a very happy life, and this unfulfilled intention gave it a meaning and completed it. His real happiness lay in selecting and buying, and he would not have been content to do this without some ultimate object in view. But the practical carrying out of his scheme would have given him more trouble than pleasure, and, in fact, he constantly put it off till it was too late."

"But that is what seems to me so dreadful," said Humphrey. "There is something pitiful in a life so missing its highest aim, in being so resultless—long years of working to no end."

"Can one judge of a life in that way?" said Ersilia, flushing up with some displeasure perhaps. "My uncle's life was one amongst others—everyone could not be so, and it would not satisfy everyone; but I have always thought there was something very beautiful in his genuine love for beautiful things, and his perfect knowledge and judgment in such matters. And he always looked upon what he was doing as a means of ultimate good to others: if he deceived himself it was unconsciously. He had a rare simplicity of character."

"I beg your pardon," said Humphrey, "I did not know what I was talking about. I am always blundering out stupid opinions that are worth nothing when one comes

to look at them, and now I have vexed you."

"Not at all," she answered, cordially; "I think your opinions are worth a great deal, and I daresay you are right in the abstract. I cannot judge of my uncle as I should of anyone else, I loved him too well. Perhaps, too, I was talking as much to myself as to you. Sometimes, you know, a chance word strikes into an old argument that one has fought out more than once, and then one cannot help fighting it out once more. Let us talk of something else. How does your picture get on?"

They were together and talking as in the summer days in the Pyrenees; a thrill of pleasure came over the lad, and his embarrassed self-consciousness passed away.

"My old picture?" he said. "That was no good at all. I saw that as soon as

I came back. I have begun a new one; stay, I will show you the sketch."

He took a sketch book from his pocket, and began turning it over.

"The subject is from Dante," he said, "it is where he sees Matilda gathering flowers beyond the stream in the forest. Mr. Fleming thinks the composition good."

"I like it very much too," said Ersilia, considering it, "but ought the ground to be covered with these autumn crocuses, Humphrey? I think they are spring flowers that are mentioned."

"I know," he answered, getting suddenly red, "that is only the first sketch, as it came into my head. It was that day in the forest. I was walking in front with Mademoiselle Mathilde, and I turned round, and saw you coming through the trees with your gown gathered up, and your hand full of flowers, and that gave me the first idea."

She sat musing for a while with the sketch-book open before her, then turning to the lad, "I want you to do me a kindness if you will, Humphrey," she said.

"Of course I will," he answered, "what is it?"

"It is this; I have a crayon sketch of my uncle when he was a young man; I have also a very much smaller one done by an artist friend of his shortly before his death, and I want an enlarged copy of this one to match the other which hangs in my dressing-room. Would you undertake to do it for me?"

"I will do my best," he answered in a low voice. "Thank you." He took the proposition as he felt sure it was meant—as an act of oblivion and friendship. "I have forgotten your past folly," her kind voice and words seem to say, "we are friends and companions again as before; it rests with you that we remain so hence-

forward." She could not know that it was a cruel kindness, and that it had been better for him perhaps if a thousand miles had lain between them.

She began looking through a portfolio for the sketch.

"Here are some designs that Mr. Fleming has been making for my new library," she said, handing Humphrey some sheets of paper, "it will be lighted from above, you see; there will be book-cases to the right and left probably, and pictures at the further end. I do not see this drawing of which I was speaking, I think I must have left it in the next room. We will go and look."

She led the way into the drawing-room, and Humphrey followed her; but it was not destined that the drawing should be found at that time, for as they entered at one door, Mrs. Grey and Charlotte came in at another.

CHAPTER II.

A BEGINNING OF TROUBLE.

MRS. GREY came in affable and dignified as ever, in a violet silk gown that seemed to illuminate the room. This lady's dresses which were always perfectly fashionable and well made, rustled so much, and had so many flounces and trimmings, that she was apt to give one the impression of having on two or three gowns at once. Charlotte came slipping after, blushing and wide-eyed, looking just as she used to do at the Eaux-Chaudes. She was nearly swept away in her aunt's

impressive entrance, and would have at once retreated to the chair nearest the door, but Ersilia kissed her, and took her hands in hers. "I am glad to see you again, my dear," she said, and still holding the little hand, she made the girl sit down by her on the sofa.

"This is a very great pleasure," Mrs. Grey said, as she seated herself, "I am so delighted to see you again, Princess, and Mr. Randolph too; it is almost like one of our pleasant meetings in the Pyrenees. I heard of your return to Paris only yesterday, and I said at once to Rose, that I should make a point of calling upon you to-day."

"You are very good," answered Ersilia, with the perfect simplicity of manner that used to baffle Mrs. Grey at the Eaux-Chaudes. "Your little girl is quite well, I hope?"

"She is quite well, thank you, but constantly occupied with her studies. I am

anxious that she should have every advantage that Paris can afford. She is at a drawing class this afternoon; her master was quite struck with the sketches she made in the Pyrenees; he says they are something quite remarkable for a young girl of her age. It may be foolish, but I own that I have an intense desire, I might almost say a longing, with which I am sure you artistic people will sympathise, to see my only child an artist—not professional, of course not professional—but an—an artist in short. I shall give her every opportunity of studying in these young days. Do you not think I am right, Princess?”

“I think,” answered Ersilia, “if she has any real talent, it would be a great pity not to cultivate it.”

“I am glad you agree with me. That is what I myself think—where there is talent, it should be cultivated. There are some young people, you know,” with a

glance at Charlotte, "who are so indifferent that it is impossible to do anything with them; but that is not the case with Rose—she is most industrious. I shall take her frequently to the Louvre. Mr. Randolph, you and I must arrange to go to the Louvre together some day; I should learn much from your experience, I am sure. And that reminds me to inquire whether Mr. Fleming has given up receiving on Sunday afternoons? I called at his studio last Sunday, but he was out."

"He has for the present," answered Humphrey, "he is very much occupied. I don't know if he intends to begin it again later."

"I quite long to see your picture again," said Mrs. Grey, "I remember thinking it quite—quite remarkable, if you will allow me to say so; have you sold it yet?"

"No," said Humphrey, bluntly, "I have painted it out."

"Painted it out!—painted over it, do you mean? My dear Mr. Randolph! But that is the very prodigality of genius; is it not, Princess?"

"I think it was very foolish," said Ersilia smiling, "what made you do that, Humphrey?"

"I hated the very sight of the thing," he answered, "and I rubbed it all over one day. The canvas will do for something else."

"Was that the picture with the red sky?" Charlotte said timidly, as her aunt went on talking to Ersilia. "I liked that picture, Mr. Randolph."

"Did you?" he answered, "then I am sorry I destroyed it—at least no, I am not sorry, for you ought not to like anything so bad."

"I never can understand anything about pictures," said Charlotte rather rue-

fully. "Aunt Maria knows so much about them, and is so fond of them, and I never can care about them as she does."

"I am delighted to hear it," answered Humphrey with great sincerity, "then we can talk of something else. What did you do after we left the Eaux-Chaudes? Did you go anywhere else?"

"No, we came straight back to Paris; you know we had been everywhere before. It was very dull after you left, Mr. Randolph, as I knew it would be. I wish that you could have stayed, or that we could all have gone somewhere together."

"We did not go very far," said Humphrey, smiling, "Mr. Fleming was obliged to return to Paris sooner than he expected, so we did not see much of the Pyrenees after all."

"You did not see much," cried Mrs. Grey, who had the faculty of hearing and talking at the same time, "that was really

a pity, Mr. Randolph. I am happy to say that we were able to do a great deal—not to go *everywhere*, of course—but still to do a great deal. For my own part, I should have liked to explore every nook and corner had that been possible, but the Pyrenees are of such very great extent.”

“I don’t know that I should care to do that if it were possible,” said Humphrey, “I always like to leave something for another time. Half the charm of a place is gone for me when I know it thoroughly. Don’t you know what I mean?” he said, turning to Ersilia. “If I am in a wood, I never care to walk straight through to the other side; I like to imagine that it extends indefinitely and that I might go on losing my way in it for ever.”

“Yes, I understand,” she answered, “but I am not sure that I agree with you. I like to know all that is within my reach,

though I also like to feel that there is a beyond that I do not know. I should have been glad to see more of the Pyrenees, but, as you know," she said, turning to Mrs. Grey, "we went there in the first instance on account of my aunt's health, and had to leave suddenly at last."

"I know—most sad. That excellent Mademoiselle de Brisac! I was so sorry to hear that she is out to-day, but I hope to see her before long. She is the most charming person—a little abrupt at times, perhaps, but with something quite—quite charming about her. You are not going, Mr. Randolph," as Humphrey rose and took up his hat, "I have a hundred things to say to you—if I could only recollect—"

"I am very sorry," he answered, "but I must go, I have an engagement at five o'clock."

"Well, we shall soon meet again, I have no doubt. . Shall I see you at the Embassy

to-night? Are you going to Lady C——'s next Thursday? Do not forget that my At Homes begin on Wednesday fortnight; I shall hope often to see you. I do not know whether it is the same with you, Princess, but I find that, though the season has not yet begun, my engagements are quite numberless."

Humphrey walked away from his cousin's house with mixed feelings, that he did not care to analyse. It seemed enough for the moment that his old friendly relations with Ersilia were resumed. The old days were to begin again then, with all their old sweetness and bitterness? Well, better so, he thought, than to be estranged from her, to be banished from her presence, to be treated with coldness and scorn. Does the man fevered with thirst push from him the offered cup because it is half empty? Not though he knows the insufficient draught may urge his thirst to madness.

The lad's engagement was to dine with a friend, and go to the theatre afterwards. The play was dull, and they came away before it was finished, and Humphrey, who had left a sketch-book of which he was in want at his master's studio, went round there to fetch it before going home.

The studio, as he expected, was still lighted up, for Mr. Fleming was in the habit of working late, and he found him there now, hunting through a pile of dusty portfolios.

"I was just wishing for you, Humphrey," he said, "are you in a hurry or can you help me? I want to find some studies of olive trees that I have somewhere, I know, but I cannot lay my hand upon them."

"I saw them the other day," said Humphrey, "they were in one of these drawers, I think; I will look."

He went up to a black and gold cabinet,

fitted with shallow drawers which he began to turn out. As he replaced the drawings again, one by one, he said, half-laughing, "I saw Mrs. Grey to-day, Sir. She wanted to know when you would be at home on Sunday afternoons again."

"Yes, your cousin told me she had been calling," said Mr. Fleming, stooping pre-occupied over his portfolios.

"Have you seen her since the morning?" asked Humphrey, half wondering.

"Yes, I have been spending the evening there." Then standing up and laughing, "Mademoiselle de Brisac was in despair at not having seen you to-day, Humphrey," he went on. "'That good, that excellent young man,' she said, 'I have missed him extremely. Tell him to come and see me constantly; I have had no one to laugh at or to laugh at me since we were all together. Tell him to

come in his oldest coat, and not to cut his hair unless he likes.' ”

Humphrey did not answer, he had turned away at the beginning of Mr. Fleming's speech with a sudden jealous pang. It so happened that this was the first time since her return to Paris that Mr. Fleming had spent the evening with Ersilia ; it was perfectly natural that he should have done so now, that he should constantly do so in the future, but somehow Humphrey had never thought of it. He had fancied that the old days, with their constant intercourse, their sweet familiarity could begin again. A vision of long days and evenings in which he could have no part rose before him. He went on looking at the drawings without seeing them.

“ Stop, there they are,” said Mr. Fleming, “ those on the grey paper that you have in your hand. Thank you, my boy, just pin them on to that board will you? and turn the picture round to the

light. I want to work at it to-night, for I shall be busy to-morrow,"

Humphrey did as he was requested, whilst Mr. Fleming took an empty canvas from where it was leaning with a number of others against the wall, and set it up upon an easel.

"Come as early as you can to-morrow morning, Humphrey," he said, "I have sent word to Guiseppe to be here at nine instead of eleven. Your cousin is coming to sit to me in the afternoon, I hope."

"Are you going to paint her portrait, Sir?"

"Yes," said Mr. Fleming, stepping back from the easel and considering the canvas. "By the by, there is a drawing for you there, Humphrey, that she asked me to bring you; she says she told you about it."

"I know," answered the lad. "She wants an enlarged copy."

"The other drawing is there also, that you may see the required size. If you have any difficulty with it, let me know, and I will help you. It would be a pity not to preserve the likeness exactly, and that sort of *débonnaire* expression is not so easy to catch as a more decided one."

"Thank you, Sir, but I would rather do it myself, if I can," answered Humphrey jealously, "I will take it home with me, it will do for evening work."

"Just as you like, but don't sit up working too late at night, my boy, and be here early to-morrow morning."

Humphrey had a long walk before him. On his first arrival in Paris, there had been no room vacant in the house in which Mr. Fleming occupied a small apartment, nor could he find anything in that neighbourhood to suit his limited means. But he presently heard from a

fellow-artist, of a room in the Rue de Seine, and though the distance from the studio was inconvenient, the boy, who was new to Paris, enjoyed his daily walks across the river, and liked his new quarters, which were so much nearer the old city (there was an old city in those days) than the Rue de Clichy. Paris was new to him—sometimes, even now, when in the early summer dawn, he sees the sky flush behind the domes and towers, and the light begins to flow along the river and the bridges and the silent spaces of the great city, when on some blazing noon-day, he crosses the Place du Carrousel and turns into the Louvre, when he lingers on the quays over some old book-stall, or stands for a moment to gaze on the sparkling view where, from amongst roofs and trees and spires, the towers of Notre Dame rise to form the centre of one of the most admirable pictures in the world, sometimes, I say, among these and a

hundred other scenes, familiar to him now through the varied experiences of five-and-twenty years, some sound, some passing breath of air, some merest sensation reveals again the days when they were still new to him, when, before a slim lad, life and art, youth and love, seemed to roll themselves out immeasurably.

Humphrey, then, who spent his days for the most part at his master's studio, found no fault with the situation of the room which he had now occupied for nearly a twelvemonth, though it was at the very top of a lofty house standing at the corner of a narrow cross street. It was a house full of lodgers of every degree, and, as on this evening the lad was mounting the last flight of ill-lighted stairs that led from one dingy landing to another, he saw before him a thin, white-haired man, of middle height, who ap-

peared to walk with difficulty, and whose halting steps obliged Humphrey to check his own more rapid ones. There was nothing very remarkable in the man's appearance, but Humphrey had hitherto, with the exception of a little old *ouvrière*, been the sole occupant of the upper story, and he began to speculate now on the possibility of this stranger being a visitor to himself, even at this late hour of the night.

He was not left long in doubt. The man, who looked like a gentleman, though he was shabbily dressed, turned to the left on reaching the top landing, and taking a key from his pocket, began to fit it into a door facing that which led into Humphrey's room on the right. He was awkward apparently, or perhaps unable to see well in the dim lamp-light, for, after fumbling at the lock for a moment, the key fell to the ground. He was stooping with an effort to pick it up,

when Humphrey, who had been pausing at his own door, crossed the landing and came to his assistance.

“Can I help you?” he said in French.

The stranger turned and looked at the lad, then lifted his hat with a perfectly courteous and unembarrassed air. “Thank you,” he said, “I shall be much obliged to you. This lock is rather stiff, and I am a martyr to rheumatic gout.”

Humphrey turned the key, and opened the door; he had a momentary glimpse of a firelit room, with a screen drawn across the middle; then the stranger passed in, bowed once more, and the door was closed.

It is in the nature of things that some of the most momentous introductions of our lives should be accomplished without emphasis, only to be remembered—if remembered at all—when after events have given them significance. This was Randolph’s first meeting with a man who was

to be a strong influence in his life of those days, and one stronger still on the destinies of those dearest to him; but at the time he saw nothing in it but the merest passing courtesy, which, pre-occupied with his own troubles, he had already forgotten by the time he had opened his own door and entered his apartment.

It was a large bare room with sloping walls. A table littered with drawings, an easel, a heap of books piled together, and a bed in a recess were amongst the principal articles of furniture; the lad's tastes were simple, nor, indeed, had he in any case, much money to spend in luxuries. But—*qu'on est bien à vingt ans, &c.*—Humphrey desired no better accommodation, and the gloom on his face as he entered his room to-night, had nothing to do with the uninviting aspect of bare walls and an unpolished floor.

He lighted his lamp and made up his fire, for, late as it was, he intended to work, then unrolling the drawings Ersilia had sent him, he began at once to prepare a sheet of paper of the requisite size. But when it was ready, and he had set to work, he found that he could not draw a line to any purpose. All the events of the day rolled themselves out before him once more. Voices and words and looks that during the last few weeks had seemed to be fading into echoes from a past already remote, for it was separated from him by a catastrophe, were once more present and ringing in his ears. He sat brooding over his drawing for a while, then threw down his pencil, and walked with impatient steps to the window.

It was a clear night. A thousand stars glittered in a dark sky above the thousand chimney pots and roofs that spread themselves below; here and

there a light, late as Humphrey's own, glimmered in some window, but, for the most part, all was dark and silent—the unresting silence of a great city. That sense of a universal life breathing and sentient around which to the young is like a mighty pulse beating in unison with the bound of their own impetuous blood, set Humphrey's heart throbbing now as it had done many a time before ; but it brought with it to-night a new pain, a contrasted sense, as it were, of his own individuality, too acute to be borne. He put his hands to his head, and turned abruptly away. “I am a fool,” he cried, “a fool, a fool ! Why did she ask me to return ?”

It might, in fact, have been better if Ersilia, in her inexperience and noble self-reproach, had not on that sunny morning amongst the mountains urged Humphrey to return home. His first impulse which had been not unmixed with manly resolu-

tion, had been a wise one, though he had shown little wisdom in acting on it. It would have been better for him to break away from everything associated with his dream of passion and mad jealousy. Left alone with Mr. Fleming after Ersilia's departure for La Chênaie, better thoughts had, indeed, made themselves felt. His master's complete unconsciousness of all that had been passing in his mind, the return to their old familiar habits of intercourse, the change of scene, all had helped to arouse in him a generous sympathy with Mr. Fleming's happiness, which showed itself in an extraordinary goodness and kindness to himself, to stir in him a longing to become worthier of the affection so freely given him by the two people he most revered on earth. "Who was he," he said again and again, with an enthusiasm and humility that he is glad to remember now, "who was he that he should be permitted even to

approach two souls such as these, who, in their differing strength and greatness and genius, seemed to have grown apart in the world, to meet at last and form a perfect whole?"

Such were the better thoughts which, could the lad have left behind him for a time old ties and associations, would, I think, have presently prevailed. But to maintain a changed thought amidst unchanged surroundings is, as we all know, one of the hardest struggles in life—harder, perhaps, than its converse. All that had gone to make the intensest life Humphrey had ever known, had returned to him with Ersilia, and now already on this first evening after he had seen her, the old passion and bitterness seemed rising again with redoubled force after their brief lull. One of the hardest struggles in life, I say again, to youth and inexperience, is the adjustment of the

mind, unassisted by outward change, to new conditions in which it has henceforth to live. When familiar voices and familiar phrases sound in our ears, when familiar faces smile upon us, it is inevitable that we should slip back to our former habits of thought, and it is the obligation laid upon us to recover ourselves again and again from these, to realize that between us and them lies a gulph impassable as death, that results in the terrible wrestling in which victory is certain only when we see our keenest hopes and passions dead for ever at our feet.

It was upon such a struggle as this that Randolph was entering. As he writes now, the boy's conflicts and darkness and despair seem to rise again and touch his heart with something of their old anguish. He will pass over them so far as may be in silence. They are but the ashes of a passion that was to burn fiercely for a

while, and then to lose itself, as he likes
to think, in a nobler and more unselfish
love.

CHAPTER III.

GOLDEN HOURS.

MR. FLEMING and Ersilia were not to be married till the early spring. Ersilia, who had promised to spend the winter with Mademoiselle Mathilde, would not now leave the old lady to a loneliness that she would feel on her first return to Paris after years of absence. By the end of a few months she would, it might be hoped, be so far accustomed to her new life, which indeed was the one most congenial to her, as to feel reconciled to the loss of Ersilia, on whose sweet helpful-

ness she had learned to depend in a hundred ways. In the meantime the engagement was hardly known, for Ersilia had few personal friends, and Mademoiselle Mathilde, who could not bear the thought of the coming separation, always tried to ignore it as much as possible.

It was in the days that followed that the Princess Zaraikine's portrait, of which mention has more than once been made, was painted, and the four or five people who had so often been together in the Pyrenees, not unfrequently met again in Mr. Fleming's studio. Humphrey of course was there, and Charlotte often accompanied Ersilia, for the girl, who had skilful fingers for all kinds of needlework, liked to bring her sewing or embroidery and sit stitching silently in a corner whilst the painting was going on. Later in the afternoon Mademoiselle Mathilde would appear, and occasionally Mrs. Grey herself would come sweeping in to bear away

the reluctant Charlotte. Mrs. Grey in Paris was not indeed altogether the same as Mrs. Grey at the Eaux-Chaudes. Her engagements were so numerous that, as she explained, it was only a few minutes she could find to bestow upon us in the studio; but though comparatively haughty, she had yet not forgotten how to be affable. She invariably reminded Humphrey that they were to spend a day together at the Louvre; with Ersilia she conversed of the fashionable world, whilst her remarks on Mr. Fleming's pictures at once exasperated him and made him happy for the remainder of the day.

"I delight in symbolism," she used to say, "I think all art should be symbolic, Mr. Fleming; it should appeal through the eye to the higher sensibilities. That is what always charms me in your pictures; they are so—so ideal; there is nothing realistic about them. This for instance, appears to me perfect, quite

perfect, except—might I venture to make one very small critical remark? Hypercritical you will perhaps term it, but—this violin; are you sure that violins were invented at that period? I had fancied that they were of later date.”

“Turn the pictures to the wall, Humphrey,” Mr. Fleming would say when Mrs. Grey was gone, “I am glad they have no ears to hear with, poor things; how they would suffer if they had!”

Mrs. Grey, however, did not often appear, and these November afternoons passed one like another. Mr. Fleming and Ersilia talked, Humphrey worked silently at his easel, and perhaps—for the lad as I have said, was of a silent nature—no one guessed that he was absorbed in anything but the picture before him. Sometimes, in an interval of rest, Ersilia would correct the proof sheets of her volume of MSS. now passing through the press, or Charlotte sing one of her clear-

voiced little songs. Then, as the early dusk fell, and Mr. Fleming and Humphrey laid aside their brushes, Ersilia would go to the piano and play in the firelight, a clatter of cups and saucers would be heard, and old Marguerite the cook, wondering but gracious over these unusual proceedings, would enter with a tea-tray. As Randolph looks up now, he seems to see it all again—Ersilia smiling and pouring out tea at the little table set near the window, Mr. Fleming standing in front of his easel considering his afternoon's work, Charlotte flitting about with the pretty yellow hair that Humphrey once persuaded her to let him paint for the head of an angel, who still soars on an old canvas in yonder corner. It is hours such as these that leave golden memories in the lives of happy people—memories of happy voices and sweet laughter that ring down the long years as the fire brightens and the night looks blackly in at the

window, of opening doors that admit best-loved faces, of clasping hands, and eyes that meet to read each other's thoughts. If to Randolph that time brought with it a pain from which he presently broke away, yet it is with a thrill as from vanished bliss that he recalls it now. For some happiness there is, which, only to witness, seems to make life fuller and wider, the mere remembrance of which stays with us, like the scent of flowers we have known in our childhood, a hint of infinite possibilities. Such, I think, is the happiness of a noble soul that finds its chief good in submission to a genius and experience that it feels to be higher than its own, of a sensitive and impressionable nature filled with the joy of a sweet and cheerful steadfastness unknown to itself. . . . Randolph likes to remember Ersilia as she was in those days when every hour brought some new experience to give new meaning and beauty

to her life. He likes to remember Ersilia, but he finds it hard to write of Mr. Fleming even now. Once only in that lonely life, averse to common joys, ruled by the alternating rapture and despair of imagination, once only, perhaps, there dawned an exquisite reality—to pass again into a darkness whose intensity was measured by that of the lost delight.

There was a less ideal happiness which it might have cheered Humphrey to contemplate, had he been capable at this time of receiving any such consolation. Setting aside Ersilia's approaching marriage, Mademoiselle Mathilde was in a state of radiant satisfaction. M. de Florian had left her a handsome legacy and the use of an apartment in his Paris house, and the old lady, who had had but a small fortune of her own, was better off now than she had ever been in her life before. She had acceded more or less willingly to her brother-in-law's earnest

request that she would live with him in Rome, when Ersilia, as a young girl, had returned to seek his protection ; but she had naturally longed for a home of her own, and now, although she and Ersilia still lived together, she had her apartment on the other side of the courtyard, in which to receive company and give parties after her own fashion. Already she was making preparations for the coming winter, renewing old friendships, seeking out half-forgotten acquaintance, refurnishing her rooms, of which the furniture, like Ersilia's, was worn and old-fashioned—a fact to which, unlike Ersilia, Mademoiselle Mathilde was by no means indifferent. It was generally after some shopping expedition that she made her appearance in the studio, and she used to come up from the carriage laden with parcels of every size and description, tea-cups and rugs, foot-stools and screens, patterns of chintz, and silk, and damask,

on each and all of which she was anxious to have an opinion. By the middle of December everything was to be ready, and the rooms opened for her first party.

"I could wish," she used to say, "to revive some of the glories of the old *salons*, the traditions even of which are almost lost in these days. I flatter myself that I am not without some of the qualities indispensable for such an enterprise, that I have the art of collecting around me people of talent and *esprit*, and that I possess the real secret of setting everyone at his ease, by making others converse without saying more than enough myself. You, Ersilia, I expect to be invaluable to me. Your conversation is not all that I could wish; on the few occasions that we were together in society at Rome I remarked that you would sometimes sit almost silent till some subject arose that interested you, and that then

you would talk as if there were nothing else worth thinking of in the world. A graceful and general interest in every topic, however trivial, is what is required, not an absorbing and exclusive interest in one. But this need not distress you, my dear child, for you have a way of looking and moving like no one else, that is enough for one person, and I can keep the conversation in my own hands. It is all I am good for in these days, but to talk well is an accomplishment that every one does not possess. That excellent Mrs. Grey, she is a delightful person in every respect, and I have no doubt imagines that her conversation is charming, but she has not an idea of what conversation really means. She thinks of what she is saying instead of what she is talking about, and shows that she does, which is worse. Mr. Humphrey, you may come to my parties if you will talk, but you have grown more silent than ever lately,

and as I have often said, I will have no glum Englishmen in my rooms standing in corners and blocking up the doorways."

"I will do my best, Mademoiselle," Humphrey answered, trying to rouse himself, "but I would rather find out your secret for making other people talk; it must save one a great deal of trouble."

"There you are wrong; it is extremely difficult, but it is not the business of a young man like you," answered Mademoiselle Mathilde, "if everybody did that we should be no further on than we were before. You have to respond to other people's attention and not look bored when you are spoken to. You may come, and I have told Mrs. Grey that she is to bring little Charlotte. Where is the child? Oh, I remember, the *bonne* fetched her half-an-hour ago. Yes, she may come; she is improved lately, it is the air of Paris, I suppose. She looks more alive

and ties her bows straighter. And that reminds me, Mr. Humphrey, a new coat, I beg of you ; not that old one you are cleaning your palette in."

"It is a very good coat," said the lad giving the sleeve a rub. He had a real liking, philosophical or otherwise, for old clothes, and a contempt that was not all affectation for every description of finery. "But I won't come in it to your parties, Mademoiselle," he went on, "I promise to try and look my very best on those occasions."

"And your best is not at all bad," answered Mademoiselle Mathilde, nodding, as she prepared to leave the room, "you are coming with me, are you not, Ersilia ? I want to call at a hundred places on our way home. I must order a new flower-stand, and I want your opinion on the colour of the drawing-room curtains by lamplight——"

Mademoiselle Mathilde was right in what she had said about Charlotte. Hum-

phrey, painting silently in his corner, noticed that some change, hard to define, had come over the girl. She was still a very simple and foolish little Charlotte with not much to say for herself, and more timid than ever ; any sudden voice, or opening door would make her start, and blush and tremble. But there was more purpose and animation about her ; she laughed and talked more freely ; her ready tears had almost ceased to flow ; one would have said that in the dull imprisoning limits of her life, some window had opened, some hope had dawned.

One day Humphrey asked her about her life in Paris.

“You don’t find it as dull as you thought you would, do you ?” he said.

“Yes—no, I don’t know,” answered Charlotte, startled and confused, and colouring very much, “that is, there is—there are some things—I cannot tell you ; it is very dull at home.”

"What do you do with yourself all day?" asked Humphrey; "do you go out much? That is never dull in Paris; there is always so much to see."

"Is there?" said Charlotte, "but I generally go out with Aunt Maria, and we don't go to see anything; we pay visits. Aunt Maria says it is time for me to be introduced, and I am to go to all the balls this winter."

"Well, you will like that, will you not?" said the lad.

"No, I don't think I shall," answered Charlotte; "it tires me to dance, and Aunt Maria always tells me I am awkward. I don't think I shall like it much."

"That is a pity," said Humphrey, "I should have thought you liked dancing, I cannot fancy that you would ever be awkward, Miss Grey. What do you like doing?" he added with a smile.

"I don't know," said Charlotte, frankly; then, after some reflection, "I like being

with the Princess Zaraikine," she said. "I am always happy when she comes to fetch me; she is so good, and wise, and beautiful, I think there is no one like her in the world. And I like coming here because you are all so kind; and I like going out with Henriette sometimes in the Tuileries Gardens, when it is warm and sunny, and I can sit and listen to the music, and watch the babies and the children playing about. I am so fond of little children, and you are too, Mr. Randolph, are you not? You have so many drawings of them in your sketch-book."

"I like drawing them," answered Humphrey, "and I like them for themselves, too, sometimes," he added, looking down at Charlotte's upturned little face. It was impossible to think of Charlotte as anything but a child. Mr. Fleming, who was fond of her, and treated her with an unvarying kindness, used to say that there

was something pathetic about her—as if she had been dropped into the world and lost her way there.

“The evenings are the worst,” Charlotte continued, “for when Aunt Maria is at home, we all sit and work, and Rose and I read a big book of history by turns; and if I listen, it sends me to sleep; and if I don’t listen, I don’t know what we have been reading about, and Aunt Maria is angry.”

“That is a hard case,” said Humphrey, laughing, “I should always go to sleep if I were you; you could not be expected to remember anything then.”

“Do not listen to him, Charlotte,” said Ersilia, smiling, as she came up to them. “You know,” she said, smoothing back the girl’s shining hair, “we agreed that you are going to read all sorts of books, and learn about all sorts of things, that you may be a wise woman some day.”

"But I don't know how," said Charlotte, looking helpless and frightened. Like all people of a diffident nature, she preferred the chance of being blamed for not attempting a thing, to that of being blamed for carelessness or dullness if she did not accomplish it. "I wish I were wise," she went on, "I wish I was like Rose. She is very clever and always remembers things, but I never can do anything."

"Indeed, I think you can," said Ersilia, "you learn languages easily, and you can sing, and embroider beautifully. You have learnt all those new stitches I showed you, and can do them better than I can now. See, here is a pattern that Mr. Fleming has been designing for the cushion you wished to work; you will like to do that, will you not? And I do not know why you should not learn other things as well—things that would show you that we need never find life quite

dull and uninteresting, because there is always so much in it that is beautiful."

Ersilia had that large faith in human nature which springs from a loving heart and wide imaginative sympathies; but she had also, at that time, her share of the inexperience of youth, and her faith took the form of believing in the latent power of everyone to accept those truths which she herself held to be amongst the best and noblest in life. It is a belief to which all high natures cling—only after many failures, perhaps, do they learn to exchange it for the yet larger faith in the differing capacity for goodness in every human soul, and recognize that it is in searching out and discovering this that the truest wisdom lies. Our dim little Charlotte, at any rate, had no strength to follow in the path along which Ersilia would willingly have led her. She loved the Princess Zaraikine and clung to her

as to a superior being, one who had power to bring change and light into her dull round of cheerless days, but she felt vaguely that she was out of sympathy with her, and the fact may explain how it was that Ersilia was not at this time a stronger influence in the girl's life. Something there was at work in Charlotte, something that would often set her musing with her embroidery lying neglected before her, but it was not Ersilia's presence. What could she be thinking of? Humphrey sometimes could not help speculating.

He was not left to speculate long. About this time he began to come much less to the studio; only a few days after the above conversation, one of his old London fellow-students passing through Paris on his way to Rome, gave him an excuse for absenting himself, and he hardly saw Charlotte for a time, but he

was destined to become before long, in a wholly unlooked-for way, intimately acquainted with her affairs.

CHAPTER IV.

CHARLOTTE AGAIN.

ONE dark December evening, about eight o'clock, Humphrey was mounting the stairs to his room at a somewhat less rapid pace than usual. The lad's heart was heavy; he had been dining at a restaurant with some acquaintances for whose society he did not care, and he had left them soon after dinner on the plea that he had some work that he must finish at home; but the work itself had but little interest for him, and he was half repenting his decision as he thought of

the solitary hours to be spent in a room where of late gloomy thoughts and moods seemed always standing ready on the threshold to receive him. Humphrey's heart was often heavy in those days, when as it seemed to him, through no special volition on his part, but through a natural sequence of emotions he was gradually drifting away from his old life, and from all that had made that life worth living.

The staircase, as I have said, was ill-lighted, but a dim oil-lamp burned here and there, and as Humphrey reached the second landing, he was arrested by seeing a little figure come flying down the upper flight of stairs. It was a girl, running so impetuously that her foot slipped, and she only saved herself from falling down the last step by catching hold of the balustrade. As she paused to take breath and recover herself, she looked round with a startled glance; a pair of frightened

dark eyes met Humphrey's, and he recognised Charlotte Grey.

"Miss Grey!" he said, in extreme astonishment.

She started and turned quite white at the sound of his voice, shrinking against the wall, with her hands pressed back, as if she would willingly have shrunk out of sight altogether. There was a moment's pause.

"Did I startle you?" said Humphrey at last, "I am very sorry."

"No, oh no," she answered, "only I did not know who it was—I did not expect to see you here."

"Don't you know that I live in this house?" said the lad, "I have a room up at the top. Surely you are not here all alone?" he added, unable to conceal the surprise that he felt at seeing the girl there at such an hour.

"Oh, no, Henriette is there, she said she would wait for me outside," she

answered; then looking at him with eyes still wide with fright, "do you live here?" she said, "in a room at the top of the house?"

A door opened just behind them, and a man brushed past, turning again to look at the two as he made his way downstairs. Humphrey felt that they could not stand talking there any longer.

"Don't you think we had better go?" he said, "let me see you downstairs; this house is full of people, and there are always a good many about."

She took his arm, and they went downstairs silently. In the covered courtyard below they found a white-capped maid, who came up to them.

"*Allons*, Mademoiselle, we must make haste," she said sharply, staring at Humphrey as she spoke, "Mademoiselle Rose will be back by half-past nine, and that dress of Madame's must be finished before she comes in to-night."

"Are you going home?" said Humphrey to Charlotte, "you are not going to walk, surely. Have you no carriage here? Let me call you one; it is much too long a walk for you to the Rue du Helder at this hour of the evening."

It was dark and drizzling outside. Without further question Humphrey hailed a passing *remise*, and put Charlotte and the maid into it.

"Thank you," said Charlotte, "but I would rather have walked. I—I want to speak to you. Please come too," she went on in a distressed voice, as he shut the carriage door and wished her good-night, "please, I wish you would come too."

Humphrey hesitated, but at that moment the horse gave a start and a plunge, the maid gave a scream, and Charlotte looked frightened out of her wits again.

"I will see you safe home," he said. He jumped on the box beside the driver,

and they went rattling along the lighted streets and quays. But when they stopped at the Rue du Helder, and Humphrey would again have said good-night, Charlotte still looked at him with imploring eyes.

“Please come in—only for one minute,” she said, and without waiting for an answer, she ran quickly upstairs.

Humphrey could only follow. Mrs. Grey’s apartment was on the second floor; the door was already open, and Humphrey passed through the entry into a small room where there were lights and a fire, and which opened into a larger drawing-room beyond. Charlotte had disappeared, but in a moment she returned without her bonnet and cloak, which she had hurried to take off. Her colour had come back, but she still had a scared look, like a child suddenly found out in a fault.

“I only wanted to ask you—please, if

you don't mind," she began, confusedly, and without any preamble, "if you won't tell any one that I have been out to-night, only Henriette knows, and she will not tell."

"Of course, I won't speak of anything you don't want mentioned," said Humphrey, then getting rather confused in his turn, he said awkwardly enough. "I hope you won't mind my telling you, Miss Grey, that I don't think that house is the sort of place you should go about in alone in the evening. You know a big Paris house of that kind is like a street. There are always people about, and you might be annoyed or frightened."

"Oh, I know," said Charlotte, with widening eyes. "I was frightened; but Henriette said she could not go up all those stairs, when there was not even a chair to sit down on at the top, so I was obliged to go alone. But I was very glad when I saw you, though I was startled at

first. I did not know that you lived there; I never met you before."

"Before?" said the lad.

"Yes, I have been there twice before; not for myself, you know, it was to see some one who is very ill—but I mustn't tell you about him, it is a secret," said Charlotte, not without an air of importance. "At first, when you said that you lived at the top of the house too, I was afraid that you might know all about it, but I see that you don't."

"I don't, indeed," said Humphrey. He stood considering for a while; into what mischief was the girl running her foolish little head? He remembered her troubles, on which he had sometimes speculated, at the Eaux-Chaudes, and could not help connecting them with her proceedings now. "If you have a friend living in the same house that I am in," was all he could think of to say at last,

“perhaps I could be of some use to you, if you would tell me how.”

“But he said I was to tell no one anything about him,” said Charlotte with a perplexed look, “and he is ill and so poor, and there is no one but me to go and see him—he used to be so kind to me—” she ended with a sob, and the tears that had gathered in her eyes whilst she was speaking, began to roll down her cheeks.

“I should like you to know about it,” she said presently, “but it is a great secret that he is there at all. He asked me if I could keep a secret, and I said ‘yes,’ and so I can. I didn’t mean to tell you, I couldn’t help meeting you on the stairs, could I?”

“Of course not, and you have told me nothing that need distress you,” said Humphrey, trying to comfort the poor little bewildered girl, who had begun to sob again. “Don’t cry, please,” he said,

"only tell me if I can't be of some use to you. Does no one know anything about this who could help you—not the—Princess Zaraikine, or anyone?"

"No, oh, no!" said Charlotte, looking frightened, "he said I was not to tell her, or anyone, that he is here. He didn't say you, though," she added, "he doesn't know about you, and perhaps, as you live in the same house, you could go and see him, and that might do him good."

"I would go with pleasure if you think your friend would like it," said Humphrey, really anxious to help the girl, but not clearly seeing his way to it, "only—I don't want to learn your secrets, you know, and I think you would do better to tell them to some one else; to your aunt or to the Princess Zaraikine, who would give you much better advice, if you wanted it, than I can."

"But it isn't a secret any longer, if you

know he is there," said Charlotte, rather ruefully. "I didn't mean to tell you, but I don't think he will mind your knowing, because you are kind and will be able to help him. I have known him for a long time. He used to give me lessons in French and German when we were in Brussels last winter, but after we went away he was very ill and had to give up teaching. Then he got better and came to Paris, but now he is ill again, and cannot give lessons, or write, or do anything to earn money."

Charlotte, in spite of her remorse at having betrayed the secret, was evidently not without a sense of pleasure at having something to tell, and some one to tell it to; but, towards the end of her speech, the corners of her mouth began to fall, and the tears came tumbling down again, whilst Humphrey stood puzzling over this perplexing confidence.

“How did you know he was in Paris?” he said at last. “Did he come here?”

“No, he wrote to me—he used to write to me sometimes. I had a letter from him at the Eaux-Chaudes, but I told the Princess Zarakine about it one evening, and she said that I ought not to have letters that Aunt Maria knew nothing about. I never thought of that before, he was so kind to me. But I didn’t write to him again after she said that; only when I knew he was in Paris, and so ill and poor, I could not help going to see him. He has only one room to live in, and no money to pay the doctor or anything.”

“Surely he did not take mon——,” Humphrey began in indignation, but checked himself.

“No, oh no!” cried the girl hastily, startled by his tone, and blushing scarlet with some consciousness or embarrassment that made her look less childish than

.

Humphrey had ever seen her before. Was she speaking the truth? No one, I believe, ever knew the whole truth of this story, of which Charlotte's account now was filling the lad with a sense of wrath and repulsion towards the chief actor in it such as he had never felt before. Charlotte was too simple and guileless as her present conduct proved, to imagine or carry out any preconcerted scheme with success; but she had not the clear, instinctive sense of truth which belongs to stronger and nobler natures, perhaps, than hers, and moreover she had that tendency to concealment which is the inevitable result of harshness on a timid mind. No one, I say, ever knew the whole truth, not even Ersilia, though Charlotte had confided some of her troubles to her at the Eaux-Chaudes—certainly not Humphrey. And yet the story, as he learned it, partly now from the girl herself, partly later on

from other sources, was a common-place one enough.

During the previous winter in Brussels, Mrs. Grey, always dutifully intent on improving her niece's puzzled little brain, had engaged for her instruction a certain Monsieur Rossel, who had been recommended to her, as a competent teacher of such French and German literature as was suitable for a young lady of Charlotte's age and position. Rose did not share these studies, and Mrs. Grey being, as we know, a person of many and varied engagements, Charlotte generally took her lessons protected by the presence of her maid Henriette. One day, Monsieur Rossel coming in, found Charlotte in floods of tears over a copy-book whose pages were sullied by nothing but the great drops that were fast inundating it. Monsieur Rossel, imperturbable setter of Procrustean tasks to a dozen young ladies in turn, had left the girl a lesson to prepare altogether

beyond her powers. Her aunt, coming in and finding it undone, had scolded her, Monsieur Rossel was coming and would scold her more, and all, so far as she could see, for no preventable fault on her part. Life had thus suddenly become a problem altogether too sad and too perplexing for our little Charlotte.

Here was a pathetic tragedy for an imperturbable master of literature to fall upon! Monsieur Rossel, who was not really imperturbable, and a teacher through circumstances only, not through vocation, was apparently equal to the task of comforting his little pupil, who, as we know, was fair and pretty, and had simple, winning looks for those who were kind to her. He assured her that nothing in the world could be of less consequence than her lesson, that he would explain to her aunt that it was only he, and not she at all who had been to blame, and that she should have no difficulties with him for

the future. Such a solution of her insoluble problem seemed like a dream to Charlotte, accustomed to find herself always in the wrong without knowing why. From that day, Monsieur Rossel had all the gratitude, and more than gratitude perhaps, of a little heart in which the most trivial occurrences assumed the proportions of momentous events. The master seems to have kept his promise, and to have troubled the girl with no more difficulties. The formal lessons in French and German literature were exchanged for instructive conversations in those languages, and it was probably in the course of these that Monsieur Rossel presently began to hint at fallen fortunes and unmerited sufferings; and Charlotte, though innocent of romances, had doubtless heard enough of Polish Counts and Royal adventurers, for her small imagination to begin working. Who knows what else? Was Monsieur Rossel on his side attracted by this simple,

tender little heart, which was ready to respond to the first appeals to its affection and compassion? Something he seems to have said of a happier future in store for her if she would trust to him, of a home far removed from all harshness and unkindness; but Charlotte, unused to friendly words, may easily have interpreted commonplace expressions amiss. Who shall say? The girl, as everyone knew, would have a large fortune when she came of age, and in the meantime was supplied by her guardians, as Humphrey had happened incidentally to learn, with a more than usually liberal allowance. This part of the story, which came only through her own confused statements, was never quite cleared up.

At the end of the season, Mrs. Grey left Brussels, and darkness fell once more upon Charlotte, a darkness hardly relieved by M. Rossel's occasional letters.

“When I heard from him at the Eaux-

Chaudes that he was so ill, I was very unhappy," she said, "I thought that he was going to die, and that I should never see him again; and then when I mightn't answer his letter, that he would think I had forgotten him. But at last I got a letter to say he was in Paris, and to ask me to go and see him."

"The sneaking scoundrel!" Humphrey had nearly said aloud, but checked himself as he met Charlotte's appealing eyes. "I will go and see him," he said instead, "you say he lives in the same house that I do; will you tell me where I shall find him?"

"He lives on the top story, the first floor to the left of the staircase," replied Charlotte. Then beginning to quiver a little. "Do you think he will be angry with me for telling you?" she said. "Please, I think, I had rather you didn't go."

"On the top story, the first door to

the—why, then, I believe I have seen him,” said Humphrey, astonished, but rather relieved, “an old man with white hair.”

“Yes, he is old, but I think not very old,” Charlotte answered, “his hair is white, but that is because he has been ill and in trouble. He told me that it was quite light like mine, two or three years ago. Do you know him? Do you think he will be angry with me?”

“I saw him on the stairs one night—he looked very ill,” said Humphrey. “I don’t think he will be angry with you; I will go and see him, and explain how it was, and then, if you like, I will let you know sometimes how he is.”

“But that won’t be the same to me as going myself,” said Charlotte, piteously, “it makes the days seem quite different when I can see him. He lets me talk as much as I like, and never thinks me foolish.”

"But I don't think you ought to see him without your aunt's permission," said Humphrey, speaking straight out at last, as if to a child. "I don't think she would like you to go there without her knowledge."

"Oh, no, she would be very angry if she knew—but then she always is angry with me, so that does not make it any worse," said Charlotte, with unconscious philosophy. "I ought not to have gone out, I know, but I could not think of any other way to see him. Perhaps, when he is well again, he will come here."

"Perhaps he will; that will be all right," said Humphrey. "Shall I tell him that you will not be able to go and see him again at present?"

"I—mayn't I write him a note for you to take?" said Charlotte flushing up, and with tears trembling in her eyes again; "please, I *must* write to him, he will think me so unkind."

She ran to the table and began writing with hurrying fingers. In a few minutes she returned to Humphrey with a note which the lad had not the heart to refuse. It was addressed in her childish, unformed hand, to M. Rossel, Rue de Seine.

"I have told him I can't come again just now," she said, "please, will you let me know soon how he is? Only I never see you now—you don't come to the studio. But I shall want to hear; and you won't say anything about it to anyone else?"

"Of course not," answered Humphrey, rather indignant, "but will you let me advise you, Miss Grey, to tell all your story to the Princess Zaraikine? She will be able to help you if anyone can"—"and keep you from getting into any more mischief," he had nearly added.

"Yes, I know. Thank you, you are very kind," she said. Then lifting her

eyes to his with the gentle look in them that had won more than one heart for little Charlotte, she said, "There are a great many kind people in the world, I think; I used to fancy there were none."

"Indeed, I cannot imagine how anyone can be unkind to you," said Humphrey, as he took her little hand in his, and left the room. And, in fact, he would as soon have thought of being unkind to a little bird flying giddily round its nest, as it tries its wings for the first time.

So these had been Charlotte's troubles, Humphrey thought to himself, as he walked along with her poor little note in his pocket, and a great deal of compassion in his heart for the little stray girl whose childish faults might end by crushing her woman's life. What would become of Charlotte, with the dull hours of which she took such weary count? Randolph already dimly felt what he has

often thought since, that the sorrows of which we hear so much in the world, misunderstood genius, unappreciated talent, thwarted ambitions, and the like, are not perhaps, amongst the worst. For them there is compensation in the very powers that work discontent. There are sorrows more pitiful than these—the sorrows of dim natures with no clear vision beyond the small successive events of their own lives, with no wide sympathy with unpersonal interests in which to forget their personal troubles, with no sense of the worth of that suffering which brings with it a comprehension of the sufferings of humanity. Nothing, I think, can be sadder than the unexpectant dullness that seems to gather on the faces of those who share in the common deprivations of life, without power to grasp the splendour also common to all who can open their hearts to receive it. And if Christianity only, perhaps, in its divine freedom from scorn,

can solve the problem of natures such as these, Christianity itself too often reaches them through the channel of some complex creed, robbed of its simplest truths and clearest inspirations.

So Randolph vaguely felt even then, as he walked along, musing upon dim little Charlotte and her troubles.

It was still early when Humphrey reached home; he could see a light shining under M. Rossel's door, and with Charlotte's note in his pocket, he resolved to call upon his neighbour and deliver it, if possible, that very night. He knocked. A voice from within cried, "Come in!" and he entered the room, of which he had already had a passing glimpse.

In size and shape it was the counterpart of his own, but a screen drawn across the middle converted the lower half into a warm interior, where M. Rossel sat in a large arm-chair by a table set in front

of the fire. Humphrey recognized him at once, and he saw also that Charlotte's supposition that he was not very old, was a correct one. The lines on his face were of suffering rather than of age; his blanched hair was abundant, and together with his short beard and moustache, had the faint gilded look peculiar to yellow hair that is turning white; his grey-blue eyes were narrow, dim, and half-closed. He might have been any age between forty and sixty; he was, in fact, about forty-eight.

He was not alone. Opposite to him, in front of the fire, stood a long-faced, red-whiskered man, well-dressed, and with a travelling-bag swinging in his hand.

"I can only say, Monsieur, that you've played me a shabby trick—a most confoundedly shabby trick," he was saying angrily, as Humphrey came into the room; "but it's of no use to discuss the matter any further, and as I must leave for

Brussels to-night, I have the honour to wish you good-evening."

"Wait a minute—there's no hurry," said M. Rossel. His voice, though hoarse and feeble, was pleasant; his accent not Parisian, but better than that of his Belgian companion. "Upon my honour," he said, "I am very sorry; I had no wish to throw you over, but when a man is as hard up as I am he must look after his own interests."

"It's as shabby a trick as ever I knew," repeated the other with increasing irritation. "Why the articles you promised me are advertised—advertised by me in this month's *Revue*, and what the devil will my subscribers think when they see the whole series appear in the *Chronique* instead?"

"That you were a fool to advertise before your agreement was signed and settled, I should say," answered M. Rossel.

“Well, Monsieur, well, there is nothing more to be said. I was a fool, no doubt —no doubt I was a fool ; but I had your promise, and I trusted to your honour. I thought, Monsieur, you would look upon it as a matter in which your honour was engaged.”

“Not at all,” answered M. Rossel ; “I looked upon it simply as a matter of business. Excuse me,” he said, turning to Humphrey, who was standing by the screen uncertain whether to advance or retreat, “will you find yourself a chair ? No, don’t go away, I shall be at your service in one minute. Look here, now,” he went on to the Belgian editor, “I don’t want to quarrel with you. We have done very well together hitherto, and if we can come to any arrangement now, nothing could please me better.”

“What arrangement, Monsieur ? what arrangement is possible ? I can’t pretend to offer you more than the Editor of the

Chronique. I am an honest man, M. Rossel, and I can't afford to bribe my contributors. At the same time, you have put me in a confoundedly awkward position, and if you have anything reasonable to propose I am willing to listen to it."

"Well, look here," said M. Rossel again, "the fact is I am so hard up that I am obliged to sacrifice something for the sake of present convenience. You have the advantage of me, and that's the truth. Suppose, for instance, you could make it convenient to come to some settlement before leaving Paris? But sit down again, and let us talk it over."

The Belgian drew a chair to the table, and the two men began to talk in undertones, whilst Humphrey, embarrassed by his awkward position, stood studying an old black engraving that hung upon the wall. Presently, however, M. Rossel spoke again, and in a louder voice.

"I suppose you will want me to sign

these papers," he said; "and how the devil I am to do it with my hands crippled like this, I don't know. I must trouble you to write the receipt, and I will put my name to it as best I can."

He took up a pen as he spoke with a hand which, as Humphrey now saw, was so bandaged and swollen as to be nearly powerless, and scrawled his name on one or two papers in succession. The Belgian placed them in a pocket-book, then rising took up his bag and prepared to depart.

"Upon your word and honour now, M. Rossel, you won't disappoint me again," he said. "I assure you that, to a man in my position, this sort of thing is ruin—absolute ruin."

"Confound it! I have signed your papers, what more do you want?" said M. Rossel. "You shall have your articles all in good time; if not, you had better come back to Paris and reclaim your money. *Bon voyage.*"

He nodded as the Belgian left the room, then turning to Humphrey again, scrutinised him with his dim eyes.

"I beg your pardon for keeping you waiting," he said; "pray sit down. You must excuse my want of ceremony, but I am tied hand and foot, as you see."

"I am only come on a message," said Humphrey, advancing into the circle of lamplight, but standing with his hand on the back of a chair. "Miss Grey begged me—I have brought you a letter from Miss Grey."

"From Miss Grey," said M. Rossel, raising his eyebrows slightly. He took Charlotte's letter, glanced through it, then looked up at Humphrey again.

"I must explain," said the lad, getting rather red and embarrassed, "it was by the merest accident that I met Miss Grey on the stairs to-night, and learnt that she knows you."

"It was no matter," answered M.

Rossel, "I did not want all Paris to hear of my arrival, but, of course, I knew she would tell some one. Sit down, will you not? I do not often have any visitors except the porter's wife, and a confounded doctor who does not understand my complaints. You are my neighbour, I think? It was you who were good enough to unlock my door for me, one night, if I am not mistaken."

"Yes," said Humphrey, "I live in the room opposite."

"Exactly. Well, you rendered me a service, I have been in no need of again. It was the door of my prison that you opened—I have not been able to stir from my room since."

There was a touch of querulousness in the tone of these last words, which, together with the helpless condition of a strongly-made man, moved the lad to pity. He forgot Charlotte and his indignation,

and, drawing a chair forward, he sat down at the table.

"You are English?" M. Rossel began again. "Not travelling for pleasure, I suppose, or you would hardly be staying here?"

"I live in Paris—I am an artist," replied Humphrey.

"An artist? Working in some French studio, probably? You look hardly old enough to be independent."

"I work in the studio of an English artist," said Humphrey, wondering a little at this frank catechism. "I am a pupil of Mr. Fleming's; you have heard of him, I daresay. Everyone has."

"Fleming—," said M. Rossel, "I knew something of an artist of that name in Rome some years ago, but I don't know if it was the same man."

"It is very possible," said Humphrey, "Mr. Fleming lived in Rome for several years, I know."

"I had no personal acquaintance with him," said M. Rossel, "and I don't suppose he ever heard my name, but he was concerned in an affair in which I took some little interest. He had some reputation of an artist even then, I believe, though it is many years ago."

"It was my master, I have no doubt," said Humphrey, "I know of no other painter of the name. He has a great reputation now," the lad went on, "everyone knows him and comes to his studio."

He spoke with his old eager pride in his master's fame, but his sentence ended in a sigh. His head dropped, his voice sank; those old days seemed no more.

"I have never mixed at all with artists," said M. Rossel, "and I know only enough about pictures to be conscious of my own ignorance. I might care more for them, perhaps, if I understood them better."

He made some slight movement as he

spoke, and an open book, propped on a pile of volumes on the table before him, slipped and fell to the ground. Humphrey started forward, picked it up, and replaced it before M. Rossel, whose feeble and reluctant movements showed him to be incapable of any exertion.

"Thank you," he said, as Humphrey tried to prop up the volumes more securely, "you see what a helpless log I am. I can manage to turn over the leaves, and that is about all."

"That is dreadful," said Humphrey, impulsively, "is there no one to be with you? Surely, Monsieur, you ought not to be here all alone."

"The porter's wife looks after me," he answered, "and bores me to death. If there is a thing on earth I hate, it is a woman who potters and nurses. My doctor, who is a fool, wanted me to stay in bed and have a *sœur*; but I told him that if I was going to die, it should be in

a chair, without any confounded white cap flitting before my eyes. I do very well; not but that it is confoundedly hard to be tied here in this way—most confoundedly hard.”

“It must be—I can’t bear to think of it,” said Humphrey, with the eager and wondering pity of youth for suffering altogether alien to its own experience. “I don’t know if I could be of any use to you,” he went on, after a moment’s pause and with some embarrassment, “but I am so close at hand, and if there were anything I could do for you, I should be very glad.”

“Thank you, you are very good,” said M. Rossel, “but you are out all day, I suppose? You have your own work to attend to?”

“That is no matter,” said Humphrey, getting red, “at least—I mean, I can leave it for the present. It does not signify.”

“Thank you,” said M. Rossel again. He sat considering for a minute, “I really don’t like to trouble you,” he said, at last, “but the fact is, if you could spare me a few hours, you might be of great service to me. I have promised the editor of the Brussels *Revue Contemporaine*—that gentleman you saw here just now—a series of papers on the progressive state of society in the principal cities of Europe during the last hundred years. The first article ought to be ready by the end of the month, and I don’t want to disappoint the poor devil if I can help it—besides, it might create some awkwardness which it is always best to avoid, if possible. Now I can’t write, as you may see; but the notes and materials are all ready, and if you could help me in arranging them and writing from my dictation, you would be doing me a service for which I should be grateful.”

“I shall be delighted,” said Humphrey,

"and I will do my best, though I am afraid I don't know much about that sort of work."

"There will be no difficulty, and I don't think you will find the subject a dull one. The papers are all in that portfolio—no, I won't ask you to look them over to-night," as Humphrey got up, "but any time to-morrow, I shall be ready for you. I am always at home, and generally alone, so we shall have no interruptions."

"Very well, I shall come to-morrow morning," said Humphrey, and left the room as the porter's wife, fresh, smiling, and benevolent, made her appearance at the door.

CHAPTER V.

A NEW FRIEND.

CHARLOTTE had spoken truly in saying that she no longer met Humphrey at the studio; it was now some weeks since the lad had given up going there regularly. A friend passing through Paris had been his excuse for absenting himself in the first instance; but when his friend was gone, he still kept away. The old life under its altered conditions seemed insupportable to him, and he held aloof from it with feelings that he would have found it hard to define; even to himself he would

hardly have acknowledged that he was cherishing a growing resentment towards Mr. Fleming, as an outlet for his vague feeling of resentment against fate. Our troubles are not the less hard, but sometimes the harder to bear when they seem shaped for us by the fateful working of circumstances, and not by a visible hand. In the dull feeling of antagonism to his master, Humphrey found a definite sensation, which, whilst it increased his unhappiness tenfold, was yet in itself some sort of relief in the midst of the black cloud that seemed to wrap him round and distort every familiar object. It was for him one of those times of nightmare oppression out of which there is no clear issue but through practical duty and renunciation. It was a lesson which the boy, who was only a boy, wayward and unreasonable enough in those days, had yet to learn; but it was a lesson he was

destined before long to see written as in letters of fire across his life.

In the first weeks indeed he still made his appearance from time to time in the studio, making such excuses as he could for his absence ; and Mr. Fleming, however used to his pupil's varying moods and fits of silence, became aware at length of some definite change in his tone and spirits.

"Are you not well, my boy?" he said to him one day.

The kind voice, unconscious of offence, went to the lad's heart.

"I—I am not very well," he said, "I think I will leave my work for to-day, if you can spare me;" and laying down his brushes, he abruptly left the room. The next morning he came at an early hour, and painted steadily the whole day. His work would not go; he had lost the inspiration of his picture and could not immediately recover it; but he worked on

nevertheless till dusk. Ersilia did not come, and Mr. Fleming was out the greater part of the day. In the evening, Humphrey carefully cleaned his palette and brushes, put them aside, and returned no more.

This was shortly after his first visit to M. Rossel; nor could he, I think, have held to his dogged resolution to avoid all that he most cared for in life, but for this new interest and occupation that he had found. A genuine compassion for the lonely and suffering man filled Randolph's mind; for some weeks he was constantly with him, and a friendship, that under other circumstances could hardly have arisen, sprang up naturally between the two. M. Rossel on his side professed (and neither then nor afterwards had Randolph any reason to doubt the truth of these professions) a sincere gratitude and affection for the lad, who indeed did his best to nurse and cheer him, sit-

ting up with him more than once at night, and devoting to him a good part of each day. I do not know whether he carried his sincerity and honest purpose written in his face, or whether Charlotte's letter had been a testimonial in his favour; but certain it is that M. Rossel accepted these services without further question. They were services willingly rendered. Apart from the natural goodwill that made him glad to give help where help was so much needed, Humphrey felt pleased and flattered, as became his years, by the confidence placed in him by a man so much his superior in experience, talent, and learning, as he soon discovered M. Rossel to be. The impressions with which he had begun the acquaintance passed away. He did not forget Charlotte, but her story faded into an episode over which he sometimes wondered a little, but with which he could not feel he had any especial concern.

What M. Rossel would have done at this time without Randolph's unexpected assistance, the lad could not even conjecture. The worst of his illness, indeed, was over when Humphrey first made his acquaintance; he soon began to recover strength from day to day, but he was slow in regaining the use of his hands, and in the meantime his articles for the *Brussels Revue* must have remained unwritten. What resources he had to fall back upon, Humphrey did not inquire. His help, as I have said, was gladly given, and M. Rossel, having once accepted his offer of assistance, soon gave him enough to do in copying, arranging, and writing from dictation. Humphrey liked the sort of work, which was new to him; the subject of the papers was an amusing one, and M. Rossel's notes revealed an amount of varied reading which to the Randolph of those days, not long emancipated from school classics, seemed amazing. If, as

he had afterwards reason to believe, M. Rossel managed to satisfy the claims of both the Brussels editors by means more ingenious than straightforward, he had no suspicion of it at the time, nor, being at an age when the sympathies are out of all proportion to the powers of reasoning, would he probably have credited the fact, had it been told him. When the first essay was finished, it was with as much pride as if he himself had been its author that he sent it off, and looked forward to the day when the number of the *Revue Contemporaine* in which it was to appear should be forwarded to them. That day never arrived for him; long before the article made its appearance, the brief episode in his life with which it was associated had come to an end; but only lately he came across some old numbers of the *Revue* containing these essays, and found that he could still admire the clearness of thought and brilliancy of expression that

had struck him at the time he helped to write them. A softened feeling came over him, as he read, towards the man to whom he had devoted some hours of his youth ; it was a feeling that bridged over the separating years of a fated antagonism and alienation.

Randolph, however, did not spend the whole of these dark mid-winter days with his new friend. He had made plenty of acquaintance by this time, and in idleness or amusement was in no want of companions. Two or three of these came to be in after days valued and life-long friends ; others there were who did the lad no good, and who presently disappeared from his horizon. It is a part of his life that does not concern us here, except as it affected his whole conduct at that time. The boy was an honest-hearted boy enough on the whole with no especial love for mischief, and I do not know that he came to much actual harm. Neither would his

follies nor his scrapes, I think, have been serious, but for a spirit of recklessness that had seized him—a spirit that made him feel more and more as if he were drifting away from pure aims and noble ambitions, till the thought of past days and of Ersilia came to him as the thought of vanished happiness might come to one who looking from some outer darkness through barring gates, should see his loved ones walking amongst the flowers in the clearness of the evening light.

M. Rossel, who had a sick man's craving for the news from the outer world that seems to give a firmer hold on life, liked Humphrey to go out, and to tell him all he had been seeing and doing on his return. He liked to hear the lad talk, he said, and used sometimes to question him about his early life; and Humphrey, who, like all people of a reserved nature, looked upon every confidence as momentous, felt a new friendship for this man as he told him of

his grandfather, and his uncle, and his early life at the farm — memories still recent in those days, though already beginning to recede into how remote a past. M. Rossel, sitting in his arm-chair, appeared to take much interest in these fresh histories, which Humphrey related probably with the simplicity and earnestness we throw into subjects of supreme interest to ourselves.

“So you offended your uncle and lost a fortune because you had made up your mind to be an artist,” he said to the boy one day. “That does not say much for your wisdom, Randolph, as you will find out for yourself some time or other.”

“I don’t think so,” answered Humphrey; “I couldn’t live without painting, and I don’t care for money. If one has enough to live upon, I don’t see what more one can want.”

“One may want a good many things, my good fellow, if one has tastes above

those of a ploughboy. It is all very well whilst you are young; a crust of bread with illusions goes a long way, I know. But thirty years hence, when you have painted your best and found out that you are not the genius you think yourself now, when you have a wife perhaps of whom you are tired, and children who are tired of you, and have nothing to look forward to but twenty years or so of failing powers, things will appear very different."

"I don't know," said Humphrey, considering. He was trying, as was his fashion in those days, to bring his mind into sympathy with the last opinion he had heard. "Thirty years hence," he said at last, "I hope to be a great artist; if I am not, I shall be so disappointed that I shall not care for anything else. Of course I shall sell my pictures when they are painted, so that I shall always have enough to live upon. I shall never marry."

"That is a wise resolution that you are not likely to keep. But even if you don't marry, you will find out by-and-by that there are a great many pretty things of all sorts in the world worth having if you can afford to pay for them. However, I don't want to preach a sermon you won't believe in; only I am sorry for your own sake you have made up your mind to be an artist."

"Why?" said the lad. "I think it is the most splendid calling upon earth."

"Well, to speak frankly, I do not. From what I know of artists, I have no great liking for them, I own. They create a haze, and look at the world through it, and then damn everyone who is not of their way of thinking. I don't speak of you, Randolph, I like you; but then I think you were meant for something better than spending your life in a love-sick straining after transcendental ideas."

"I don't know what you mean," said

Humphrey, flushing up and indignant. "It is because artists see more than others," he went on with great originality, "and have the power to reveal it, that they are artists. They have more, not less insight than the rest of the world."

"There are different kinds of insight, my good boy. If you go to the bottom of a well you will see the stars by daylight, but you will see nothing else. You may call it a prejudice if you will—I am old enough to own to prejudices—but I confess that your whole race of poets, artists, sentiment-mongers of every degree, are antipathetic to me."

Humphrey looked up astonished. M. Rossel had spoken as men use to do who speak from impulse and feeling, not from motive, and the lad's instinctive surprise now first revealed to him perhaps how rare this was with M. Rossel.

"I resent the whole system as one of imposture," he went on smiling, and more

in his usual manner. "Nature has a great many pretty tricks; but they are only tricks, and an artistic and poetic mythology founded on them is as unsound as any other mythology. And then you are apt to be such a melancholy set. You narrow your life into a groove, and seem to have no power of getting outside it again. I see the beginning of it in you already, Randolph, and I have found it true of others so far as my experience goes. Your master now, Mr. Fleming, should you call him a happy man?"

"Mr. Fleming!" said Humphrey, with a sudden uncontrollable emotion, "Mr. Fleming not happy? He is the happiest man on earth. He is going to be married to the most adorable—" He stopped short. The words had escaped him involuntarily; in all his confidences to M. Rossel he had never yet mentioned the Princess Zarai-kine.

"Indeed! Then his happiness does not surprise me," said M. Rossel. "This is beside the question, but it interests me, Randolph. Mr. Fleming is going to be married to the most adorable woman—might one without indiscretion inquire who she is?"

"I don't know why I should not tell you," said Humphrey, recovering himself, "he is going to marry the Princess Zarakaine."

There was a moment's pause before M. Rossel answered.

"The Princess Zarakine—" he said, "I have heard my little pupil, Miss Grey, mention a Princess Zarakine: is it the same? She spoke of her as a friend, but she did not tell me that she was going to be married."

"She may not have known it at the time," said Humphrey. "It is no secret, but the marriage will not be till late in the spring, and it is not much talked of."

There is no reason why Miss Grey should not have mentioned it."

"And in your eyes she is the most adorable—that is awkward for you, my young friend."

"She is my cousin," answered Humphrey shortly, "and almost the only relation I have in the world."

"Your cousin; how can that be? She is English then?"

"Her mother was English," said Humphrey, "and she spent all her childhood in England. She always looks upon herself as an Englishwoman."

"I understand—yes, I remember Miss Grey spoke of her as being English. You will wonder at these questions," M. Rossel went on after a moment's reflection, "but what you say confirms me in the idea that my old friend Prince Zaraikine was the husband of this lady. He married a young English girl."

"And deserted her," cried Humphrey.

"I beg your pardon, M. Rossel, if he was your friend, but everyone knows that history and how ill he used his wife."

"Prince Zaraikine was my friend," said M. Rossel, "and I know more about his history, I daresay, than any one else. It has two sides to it, like most other histories. People do neither good nor harm gratuitously in this world. There is cause and effect in everything."

"I fail to conceive any adequate cause for a man's deserting his young wife, I must own," said Humphrey impetuously; "it seems to me a piece of cold-blooded scoundrelism."

"Of course it does. You young fellows always run your heads against a wall, and then wonder you can't see anything on the other side. Zaraikine probably saw the matter in a different light from that in which you see it. He was obliged to marry for money; but he had no wish to form an establishment, and he didn't want a wife.

He was already in love with one of the handsomest and most brilliant women in Europe, and why should he trouble himself about a little school-girl?"

"But she was his wife," said the lad.

"Very true, my good boy; but, as I have just said, he didn't marry her because he wanted a wife, but because he wanted money. He got the money, and his wife returned to live with her relations. It was quite simple, and she was much better off, if she had but known it."

"When a man like that, without honour, without principles, without morality," said Humphrey, indignant and stammering, "when a man like that marries, one cannot wonder at his deserting his wife, or at any other baseness. But I own I don't understand how any one can defend him."

"I don't defend him, my good fellow; it is not a question of defence; the thing was inevitable. When you have a wife, Randolph, you will perhaps understand

how small a proportion a man's married life may bear to the whole, and that if he cultivates varied interests, he must of necessity have an existence apart from his domestic affairs. Zaraikine, who had lived more than forty years in the world before he set eyes on his wife, had probably other things to do with his honour and his principles, and his morality, than to devote them to making the happiness of a little girl who, for the rest, was the last woman in the world to suit him. I saw her once at Vienna, shortly after her marriage; a pale girl, with handsome hair and eyes, but she had not the art *de se faire valoir* in society, and at home must have been the dullest company in the world."

Humphrey sat silent; he was uneasy and wrathful, with a certain revulsion of feeling towards M. Rossel that he could not at once overcome. He had never liked him so little as at that moment.

M. Rossel perceived it perhaps, for as the lad began putting his writing materials together with the intention of leaving for the night, he spoke again.

"You don't agree with me, I see, Randolph," he said : "and after all I am not sure but that you are right. It might have been better for Zarakine, as things turned out, to have stood by his little Hausfrau. It could not well have turned out worse for him, poor fellow. You know the end of his history, I daresay?"

"I know what every one else knows," said Humphrey, "that he was mixed up in some Polish conspiracy through his intimacy with a Polish lady, and lost his life in attempting to escape from Russia."

"Well, that is hardly a correct version. Zarakine had nothing to do with the conspiracy; he never even heard of it. A man may be in love with a woman without finding it a reason for betraying his country, and risking his own life. Zarai-

kine, who was fool enough in some ways, was not fool enough for that. It was the Countess who managed to implicate him—how, was never exactly known—and to save her son, who was concerned in the affair, sacrificed her lover.”

“The woman he was in love with?” said Humphrey.

“Yes. She had great force of character and was devoted, it appears, to this son. Zaraikine, I believe, thought she was devoted to him; but there are certain points upon which women are incalculable. I do not know how she received the news of his death.”

“Is it true that he was drowned?” said Humphrey. “That was the story I heard.”

“Yes, that is true enough,” said M. Rossel. “He was drowned in attempting to cross a river. A party of soldiers had been sent to arrest him on the frontier; he shot the officer in command and jumped

into the water, with the intention of swimming across. The stream was not wide, and there were friends waiting to give him a helping hand on the opposite bank; but it was in the dusk of a winter evening, and the current was strong and encumbered with blocks of ice; he was carried away before their eyes—”

“You were there?” said Humphrey, with keen interest.

“Yes—” he said gloomily, “I was there. After all there was nothing perhaps to regret,” he went on after a minute; “if we had saved him it might have been for a life worse than death. The young officer whom he shot was the son of a Minister high in Court favour, and there is no corner of Europe to which the Russian Government would not have pursued him. It is better as it is.”

Humphrey did not answer. Somehow, this story, in which he might have read only a just retribution, had also awakened

in him a wider sense of compassion than he had yet known; a perception that in the most wayward lives that move us to a righteous indignation there may be tragedies that may also move us to pity.

Monsieur Rossel, too, was silent for some minutes. He had a book open before him, but he was not reading.

"Tell me something more of the Princess Zaraikine," he said, presently, "she is considered handsome now, you say?"

"I don't know," answered Humphrey. abruptly, "I don't know that I ever heard any one say so. It is a subject I never discussed."

"But you think her so yourself?"

The lad hesitated. "I beg your pardon," he said, flushing, "I had rather not talk to you of the Princess Zaraikine; to me she is unlike all other women, but you have seen her yourself, and from what you have said, I don't suppose you would understand."

"You are mistaken Randolph," said M. Rossel closing his book and turning round, "when I saw the Princess Zaraikine she was a mere child. I may have thought her then an unfit wife for a man like Zaraikine, but she is probably very different now from what she was a few years ago. A girl of sixteen is not a woman at all; she has yet to develop every quality."

"I don't know," said Humphrey, "when I first saw the Princess Zaraikine, we were both children; and I believe I thought then as I think now, that there is something in her that sets her apart from every other woman upon earth."

"And that is—what?"

"How can I tell?" said Humphrey, quivering with impatience and starting up impetuously, "one does not analyse the most sacred influences that come to one in life—one accepts them."

"That is as it may be—some people like to analyse everything and find out what it

is worth. But I don't want to trouble you, my good boy. Only as an old friend of Zاراikine's, I feel some interest in his wife."

These last words sounded like a reproach, and disconcerted Humphrey, one of whose weaknesses in those days was an uneasy sensitiveness which was apt to make his most ardent impulses and steadiest resolutions alike fail before implied disapproval.

"What is it you want to know?" he said reluctantly after a pause, "nothing that I could say of the Princess Zاراikine would give you any idea of what she is, but I have a drawing of her that I can show you if you like."

He left the room, and presently returned with one of the best of the many likenesses he had tried to take of Ersilia. He laid it in silence before M. Rossel, who took it up and examined it attentively in the full light of the lamp.

"I see—it is a beautiful face," he said at length, "if this does not flatter her, she must be greatly improved. But there is something in the expression of the eyes that affects me unpleasantly; it is too dreamy and melancholy; and it contradicts that of the rest of the face, which is not dreamy. Is that your fault, Randolph, or have you been faithful to the original?"

"She has a thousand expressions—I suppose I have caught one of them," said Humphrey, "her eyes are never dreamy when she speaks."

"Then she would please me better," said M. Rossel, laying down the sketch, and leaning back in his chair, "why indeed should she look melancholy? She has youth, and beauty, it appears, and riches—she is rich, is she not?"

"I believe so—I don't know—I never inquired," said Humphrey.

He hardly knew what he was saying; he had taken up the drawing M. Rossel

had laid down, and was studying it again with misty eyes, as he had studied it a hundred times before. Presently he looked up, M. Rossel was watching him.

“ Well ?” he said smiling.

There was kindness, or Humphrey thought so, as well as amusement in his smile, friendliness as well as sarcasm in his grey eyes, which had grown keen and clear in these last days, as the dimness of ill-health passed away. The lad’s barrier of reserve broke down.

“ I don’t know how to live without her,” he said, flinging his arms across the table, and in a voice broken by a sob, “ and I can never be anything to her—never.”

A wide converse with evil as with good is perhaps essential, is at any rate almost inevitable in this world. But there comes a perilous moment in all such varied intercourse, when, from whatever cause, the soul begins to waver in its pure instincts of right and wrong, and Randolph, as he

left M. Rossel that evening, felt as though, in some such moment of uncertainty, he had allowed a desecrating light to fall within some shrine that held the hallowed symbols of his highest faith and aspirations.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE STUDIO.

HUMPHREY had not forgotten Charlotte, nor his promise to keep her informed as to M. Rossel's welfare, though the friendship between these two, which had once startled and puzzled him, was a problem he had ceased to dwell upon. He had called two or three times in the Rue du Helder, but Mrs. Grey's numerous engagements seldom allowed her to be at home, and he had only once succeeded in catching a glimpse of the girl. Indeed, some time had now elapsed since he had

seen her at all, and it was, perhaps, because his conscience reproached him on this point, that a few days after the above conversation with M. Rossel, he resolved to go to the studio on an afternoon when he thought it probable he might find her there. Charlotte had so readily promised to give up her visits to M. Rossel, that Humphrey never doubted that all communication between them had come to an end; it did not occur to him that a nature so facile in one direction would probably be equally yielding in another, and that Charlotte might at this time be under a stronger influence than his own. He only thought that she might be longing for tidings he alone could give, and that he would go to the studio on the chance of seeing her. This, at least, was the reason he assigned to himself, though who shall say how many other motives went to make up the sudden resolution?

The day was destined to be memorable

in more ways than one to Humphrey, for it was on this morning that putting his hand into his pocket before going out to breakfast at a restaurant, he discovered that two sous was the exact amount of ready money left in his possession. We so readily blind ourselves beforehand to the perfectly obvious results of our actions, that it need surprise no one that this discovery came upon Humphrey as a shock. His income, as I have said, was not large, and he had only been able to make his summer journey to the Pyrenees on the strength of those ready promises to himself of extra economy during the winter, which it is the easiest thing in the world to make. But his mode of life during the last month or two had not been favourable to economy, as he was well aware. The recklessness of which I have spoken had naturally made itself felt in his money affairs, and it would have required no great wisdom to foresee that the vague

calculations which kept his mind easily balanced, might presently end in the most clearly defined absence of anything to calculate upon. Humphrey, however, had been so used to put his hand into his packet amongst small change, that he never took the trouble to count, that he had come to regard it as impossible that an arrangement so admirably fitting in with his idea of the unalterable scheme of things should absolutely come to an end; and as he stood now on this bleak January morning in the midst of his fireless room, contemplating the brown coins that lay in his hand, he felt a not unusual difficulty in realising a state of things he himself had done his best to bring about. His perplexity was increased by the fact that he felt himself without any immediate resource. He had already on emergencies, for which the small change would not suffice, borrowed as many francs of his acquaintances as he cared to owe, or they

could afford to lend; for though a kindly notion prevailed among the young fellows who made his society at this time, that the fact of one of them having so many francs above the average was a reason for lending to another who only had so many below, they were none of them much better off than Randolph himself. He had no drawings available for sale, even if he could have found a purchaser; and the few personal possessions that he could have turned into money had in them something of the nature of relics, and could not be lightly parted with.

Humphrey, however, soon roused himself. He was a philosopher, who had worn old coats to prove that he could reduce far-reaching theories to daily practice, and he was not to be at once discomfited because the pockets of his coat were not only old but empty; moreover, he had that resolute faith in pleasant possibilities not uncommon in people who

are in the habit of shutting their eyes to unpleasant certainties. He went out, bought a roll for breakfast, and then dismissed his anxieties for the moment in the hope of some better fortune turning up before dinner-time.

It was previous to discovering the state of his pockets that he had made up his mind to go that day to the studio, and about four o'clock he set out, after finishing some work for M. Rossel, who, although better and able to write now without much difficulty, still claimed the lad's services. Humphrey was beginning to feel hungry by this time; but he had the consciousness, always dear to a philosophic soul, that he was enlarging his own experience by entering into that of many fellow-creatures — those who go hungry every day—and the slight elation he felt at this helped him perhaps to hold to his resolution; for it was with the reluctance with which we resume

relations wilfully broken off, that he had started for the Rue de Clichy. How long was it since he had been at the studio? He himself could hardly have told. Not very long perhaps, after all—not long to Mr. Fleming in the exquisite spring of gladness that had known how to blossom for him in the midst of the darkness of winter; nor to Ersilia, whose life was expanding amongst influences that seemed to crown it with glory, as the sunshine crowns the opening flower it has touched into fuller life. Only to Humphrey the days had seemed to stretch themselves out like an evil dream.

It is not to be supposed that Humphrey had been content to allow this time to pass without seeing anything of the Princess Zaraikine. It is true that he had of late given up going to her house, and that, on two occasions when she had written to ask him there, he had made no effort to break off engagements he had

already made. One of these invitations had come in a dark moment, when he could not face the thought of meeting Ersilia, and he had written a hasty refusal. On the other occasion, which was Christmas Day, he had at least the satisfaction of knowing that no unworthy motive kept him away, for he and another man had promised to cheer the sick-room of a poor consumptive lad, who, pining far from home, died a few months afterwards. But from whatever reason he had held himself aloof from her immediate presence, there were few days lately on which he had not found time to place himself in a certain doorway, nearly opposite her house, where, himself unseen, he might hope to catch a passing glimpse of her as she came in and out. This device, which had for Humphrey the original interest that we all find in the commonplaces of life when they are new to us, was not always accomplished with-

out difficulty, owing to the demands made by M. Rossel upon his time ; nor could it be affirmed that pain did not preponderate over pleasure when after, perhaps, a chill hour of waiting in his dark corner, he at length saw her pass along the street, or get into the carriage with Mademoiselle Mathilde. A widening gulf seemed between them, a sense of alienation that had arisen he hardly knew when or how, but which had taken shape day by day till it had become a moral impossibility to him even to cross the street, to exchange common words of greeting, to meet the sincere glance of her eyes that seemed to demand an answering sincerity.

Only once a little incident came to break the monotony of mingled pain and joy during those hours of watching. It was about six o'clock one evening ; it had been raining, but the clouds had passed away, and there were stars in the wintry sky. Humphrey had been at his post

nearly an hour, and had almost lost the hope of seeing Ersilia that day, when a tipsy woman came reeling along the pavement and fell, a miserable heap, at the foot of a lamp-post just opposite the doorway where he stood. The street was quiet; no *sergent-de-ville* was at hand, and she lay there moaning and unmolested. Not a minute afterwards he saw Ersilia coming along, accompanied by her old attendant Roberts. She paused at once as she came up to the poor wretched woman sitting forlorn on the pavement.

"This woman must be ill, Roberts," she said. "What can we do to help her?"

"Don't touch her, for Heaven's sake, Madam!" said the experienced Roberts; "she's drunk, poor miserable creature; that is what's the matter with her."

"Why should you say so? She has perhaps hurt herself, or fallen through weakness," said Ersilia, who, like all

people with large and simple minds, was incapable, without ascertained facts, of putting a low interpretation upon the conduct of the most abandoned wretch upon earth. "Do you think you could get up?" she said, stooping down over the woman; "it is too cold and wet for you to sit there upon the pavement."

She held out her hand as she spoke. The woman clutched it, and leaning heavily, with her other arm round the lamp-post, staggered to her feet. She looked quite young and was decently clad, except that her gown was wet and dragged in the mud. Humphrey involuntarily started forward as she laid her hand on Ersilia's wrist; but no one noticed him, and at that instant a man in a blouse came up.

"So you're at your old tricks again, are you?" he said savagely to the woman, speaking in English. "Come home with me at once, will you? unless you want

yourself locked up. I beg your pardon, Madame," he went on more quietly to Ersilia, "but you had much better let her alone. She is as drunk as she can be."

"I see—it is very sad," said Ersilia regretfully. "Don't let her walk home through the streets; she is not fit for it. If you would call that fiacre, and give me your address, I would tell the coachman where to take you."

An empty fiacre was standing at a short distance. The man called it and helped the woman in, whilst Ersilia gave some money to the driver.

"Thank you kindly, Madame," the man said in his gruff voice, as he followed the woman into the carriage, and shut the door. "I don't know how I should have got her home, and I haven't above three sous in my pocket."

"You are English," said Ersilia; "you have perhaps not many friends in Paris?"

May I come and see your wife—she is your wife, is she not ?”

“No, she ain’t,” said the man roughly ; “but you may come and see her if you like. You know where she lives.”

“I will come,” said Ersilia. “Be good to her ; she seems to be very young.”

“You had far better be doing no such thing, Madam,” said Roberts, as the fiacre drove off, and speaking with the privileged familiarity of an old servant, who can never forget the nursling she has held in her arms ; “a lady like you has no business with people such as them.”

“Why not, Roberts ?” answered Ersilia. “I sometimes wonder whether I have not more business with them than with any other people in the world—”

She crossed the street with the old servant, and the *porte-cochère* on the opposite side clanged behind them before Humphrey, who, with an instinctive dislike to his position, had come out into the

street again, could make up his mind to speak to her. He never learned the sequel to this adventure, and he felt some remorse at having been in some sort a spy, as it were, upon Ersilia's actions; and yet there was a secret exultation in his heart that he could neither describe nor defend as he walked away to the restaurant where he was to dine. It was an exultation without joy, for it had its source in all the bitterness of his life at that time; it arose from the thought that through long hours of watching such as his master had never endured for Ersilia's sake, he had won for himself, apart from his master, a share in Ersilia's life.

Humphrey then, in his most wayward moments, had known how to preserve himself from that worst sense of isolation, when sight and knowledge seem to fail us because we are wholly cut off from the loved one. And as he walked now along the Rue de Clichy in the declining Janu-

ary afternoon on his way to the studio, he forgot to think that his motive in going there was to see Charlotte, and became absorbed in another thought, which he had till now resolutely kept in the background—the thought that Ersilia might be there. Would she be there? The eager longing grew upon him as he mounted the well-known staircase, where familiar associations seemed to be lying in wait to take possession of him once more. What, after all, had he been doing all this time in absenting himself from these friends, this work, this life which alone were possible to him? Was it indeed only a nightmare that had held him during these past weeks, from which with one struggle he could set himself free and find all things as before?

The door of the studio was half open, and he went in. The grey evening which had begun to be veiled by falling snow, looked in at the unshuttered windows;

but within, the room was full of firelight, that seemed to hold Humphrey in a sweet and homelike embrace as he entered. Mr. Fleming was not there, nor Charlotte—he saw that at once as he advanced beyond a screen drawn round the doorway—only Ersilia, seated by the fire in the clear light of the crackling logs. She was never absent from his thoughts, and yet it always seemed to him that he saw her for the first time. She was leaning back now in her chair, with an open letter in her hand and her eyes fixed on the fire with the intent gaze that betokens far-off thoughts. She wore some straight-falling winter dress bordered with fur, and her fur cloak thrown over the chair made a background whose dark softness brought into relief the delicate purity of her profile, and enhanced by contrast the brighter tints of her brown hair. Even in repose there were strength and purpose in her attitude, an uncon-

cious harmony and fitness in every line. Of her, Randolph thought it might be said, as it is somewhere written of the old Greek sculptures—that in passion and repose alike one recognises the presence of a noble simplicity and silent greatness.

She was thinking intently and did not notice Humphrey's entrance till he was close to her.

"You, Humphrey!" she said then, giving her hand cordially, but without smiling. "It is long since we have seen you."

"Mr. Fleming is not here?" said Humphrey, embarrassed. His first sensations had already passed away. He felt like a stranger, and hardly knew how to explain his presence now that he had come.

"He will be here directly. He has gone to look for a portfolio that he thinks he has put away in his room at the top of the house. I am expecting Aunt Mathilde every minute."

She rose as she spoke, and going to the piano, which was open, began putting together some music that lay on it. Humphrey, constrained and miserable at something of coldness he seemed to discern in her voice and manner, remained standing where she had left him by the fire. But in a moment she came back and stood opposite to him, her hands resting on the back of the chair from which she had just risen.

"Why do you never come to see us now, Humphrey?" she said earnestly; "we miss you very much. Mr. Fleming has wanted you, I know—we have all wanted you. I was afraid you might be ill; but the day Aunt Mathilde and I called at your house, the concierge told us you were well, and were gone out."

"The day you called—" said Humphrey, stupefied.

"Yes," she said, "did you not know?"

The concierge must have forgotten to tell you."

"He often forgets—he is a stupid old man," said Humphrey. He spoke as if in a dream. She had been there, he was saying to himself the while, and he had not known it—he had never known it.

"No," he said presently, rousing himself, "no one told me. It was very good of you to come. I have been busy lately."

She did not answer at once, but stood motionless, gazing down into the fire—a somewhat sad face, whose sweetness haunted Humphrey long after.

"You have some trouble, Humphrey, is it not so?" she said at last, raising her eyes with the wistful look in them that he knew and had learned to dread like a reproach, for it held in it the memory of the maddest hour of his life. "I am sure of it, though you say nothing. Can I not

help you? Will you not let me help you?"

The first words were spoken with a slight effort, but there was a touch of pleading in her last tones that went to the lad's heart.

"What trouble should I have?" he said hastily. "Don't think of me; I am not worth thinking about. I will come to the studio to-morrow; I will do anything you like. I am in no trouble, none—"

He broke off, as his master came into the room carrying a big portfolio.

"I have found it at last," Mr. Fleming said, leaning it against a chair. "What, Humphrey, are you here? I have been wanting and expecting you every day for the last fortnight. Did you not get a couple of notes I sent you some time ago?"

"I—I got them," said Humphrey,

abashed and stammering. "I have been engaged."

"You have had friends staying in Paris, I know; but that is no reason why you should neglect your work altogether, my boy. I should have been to see after you, but I have been so busy lately I could not spare the time. It is no matter now—I have got through what I had to do; but I should have been glad of your help."

Humphrey did not answer. He was beginning to recognise the fact that life is never a nightmare that passes and leaves no results; but he had also a strong feeling that it was not for this that he had at last made up his mind to come to the studio. He turned away and began silently to help Mr. Fleming to light the gas and arrange the studio for the evening work, according to his old custom. As he did so, he came upon his own picture standing on its easel in a corner, and glad of something to occupy

him, he brought it forward to the light and began to examine it. Mr. Fleming meanwhile returned to where Ersilia was still standing by the fire.

"This is the drawing I want you to have," he said, selecting one from the portfolio and giving it to her—a crayon sketch on grey paper of a group of round-limbed children playing on the steps of a street fountain. "It is only a sketch, as you see, but when it is properly mounted and framed I think it will answer your purpose. I will take it to C.'s at once, and it will be back in a few days."

"By the time I return from La Chênaie," said Ersilia, looking at the drawing with a flush of pleasure. "I sometimes think that I like your drawings of children best of all," she said, "and none that I have seen better than this one. In Rome I have watched round dark-eyed things like these playing and

tumbling about a hundred times. How can I thank you?"

"Not by talking of going to La Chênaie," said Mr. Fleming. "I thought we agreed that there was no immediate hurry about that."

"Yes," she said; "but I have been reading Lebrun's letter again, and I think I ought to go next week. I do not like to stay here with the thought that there may be a misunderstanding that I can remove by my presence."

Mr. Fleming did not answer at once. He was examining some detail in the drawing he had taken from her hand, but in a minute he laid it down. "I shall begin to wish there were no such place on earth," he said smiling.

"Don't say that," she answered, smiling too, "it sounds like an echo of my own evil thoughts. I cannot help wishing sometimes—I am so ignorant about it all; I cannot feel yet that it is a part

of my life, and I dread all the mistakes that I may make before I have experience enough to manage properly. If I could carry out my own plans," she went on playfully, "I should not mind so much, I daresay. Having my own way would compensate for a great deal. When I was there in the autumn I hoped that I had made some progress, but you see Lebrun is still bent on putting obstacles in the way of everything I propose."

"I think I should take my own way," said Mr. Fleming. "You propose nothing but what is right, and Lebrun is only an obstinate old fellow who can be no judge in such matters as these."

"That is true," answered Ersilia; "but I am beginning to think that there is a kind of selfishness sometimes in satisfying one's own sense of right and wrong at the expense of other people; and Lebrun does understand the feeling of everyone on the estate better than I do. Perhaps I ought

to care most of all for learning to think as they think; only that is not my idea of things; I want them to care for my thoughts. . . . But you understand," she said, looking up with a flush and sudden smile; "and I don't know why I should trouble myself so much just now; only I think I ought to go, and it will be for only a few days."

"Only a few days," said Mr. Fleming, "when every moment of life is precious, one does not speak lightly of a few days. And then it will bring a change—you don't know how I dread change; it is the continual death in life."

"Do you think that?" said Ersilia; "I cannot feel it so. To me, change has meant life, not death."

Humphrey standing a little apart during this conversation, had looked up from time to time, and now these differing words drew his glance irresistibly from one speaker to the other. Mr. Fleming had

a face which all men loved, when they had learned to interpret it by the soul beneath; but it was pale and thin, worn with the lines wrought by a poet's life, in which ecstasy is for ever passing into pain. On Ersilia, too, ennobling thought and experience had left their traces, but they had as yet served only to give to her features that higher beauty which does not pass with years, and had left untouched the exquisite transient charm of youth and freshness. It was a contrast that worked completeness; so Humphrey felt with a pang not wholly ungenerous, as the two stood facing each other for a brief moment's silence—a silence in which he had no part—after Ersilia had spoken. It was only for a moment; a subtle change, as in answer to unuttered words, passed over her face; then with a swift movement she turned away and began putting on her cloak. Humphrey started forward to assist her, but Mr. Fleming

had already taken it from her hands.

“You need not go yet?” he said, as he helped to wrap it round her. “I want you to look at my picture now that it is finished. You have not seen it for nearly a fortnight.”

He lifted a picture that was leaning with its face to the wall, and began turning an easel so as to place it in the best light. Ersilia meanwhile went up to where Humphrey was standing before his own half-finished work.

“It promises well, Humphrey,” she said, after a few moments’ silent contemplation. “You ought to finish it before you lose your first inspiration.”

“How long is it since you did anything to that picture, Humphrey?” said Mr. Fleming, looking round. “You must be more regular at your work, my boy, or you will never get on.”

Humphrey hastily turned away and replaced his canvas in its corner, then took

up a small portfolio of drawings of which he had long been in need, and which he thought would serve him now as an ostensible reason for his visit to the studio.

"Shall you want me this evening, sir?" he said, coming forward with it under his arm; "if not, I think I will go now."

"I don't want you this evening," answered Mr. Fleming; "but be sure to come up to-morrow; I have some arrangements to make that I must talk over with you."

He was engaged in lowering his picture, and merely nodded a good-night. This painting, in which a pale Alcestis was bidding farewell to the familiar sunlight, was afterwards recognised as one of Mr. Fleming's finest works. Humphrey knew all the sketches and first studies for it by heart; only last spring he had watched its early progress, and yet somehow the lad could hardly bear to glance now at the achieved beauty that would

once have filled him with an exulting pride in his master's genius. He shook hands hurriedly with Ersilia, without looking at her, and turned to leave the room. Just as he got within the screen, however, his portfolio slipped, and he was obliged to pause and steady it on one knee, whilst he re-arranged the contents. As he half knelt, half stooped over this task, he could, though in shadow himself, still see into the glow of light and warmth in the room beyond. . . . Mr. Fleming had at last succeeded in placing his picture to his mind; it stood facing Humphrey, one of those revelations of the secrets of colour that enrich life. Ersilia was mutely gazing at it, with an entire absorption that showed itself in her arrested attitude, in the unconscious tension of her clasped fingers. She did not move till Mr. Fleming, who was standing a little behind her, spoke,

“Are you satisfied with it?” he said.

She turned then and looked at him, her lips apart, her cheeks pale, in her eyes a fire, an enthusiasm that Humphrey never had seen, never could have seen in her before.

“Ah, you, you—” she cried, with I know not what passionate emotion thrilling in her voice, “you make the world glorious !”

Humphrey heard no more. He gathered up his drawings as best he could, and escaped ; down the dark staircase, out into the street he fled, haunted by a voice whose tones seemed ringing in his ears, by eyes whose sweetness seemed to pierce the gloom, yet bore no message to him.

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. GREY'S AT HOME.

HUMPHREY rushed impetuously down the stairs, nearly knocking over Mademoiselle Mathilde, who was coming in through the *porte-cochère*. She did not recognise him; but merely saying, "Eh, eh, young man, look what you are about," took her way upstairs to the studio, whilst Humphrey pursued his into the street. It was snowing fast now, a snow that left no compensating whiteness, but melted into mud as it fell; but he hardly noticed it. He took no heed

that he was cold and wet; he forgot that he was hungry; it seemed to him but one long minute of fiery impulse from the moment of his leaving his master's studio, to that when he reached his own door in the Rue de Seine, and dashing upstairs two steps at a time, shut himself up in the loneliness of his room.

There the chill darkness subdued him. Without caring to strike a light, he threw himself on the low bed, and sat with his head in his hands staring blankly through the gloom at the outline of the windows defined by the dim snow twilight without, the waves of passion slowly ebbing as the cold gained upon him. What after all had he been doing all this time? Why should he hold aloof from the voice, the eyes, the sweet presence, that were his life? Had he not as much right as another. . . . ? he kept asking himself, with a sort of dull anger and misery. To the poor lad, sitting there shivering in the

dark, that brief visit to the studio seemed like some door that had opened suddenly on the blackness of his path to let out a flood of light and music, then shut again leaving the blackness tenfold intenser than before. What madness had made him fly from her? And what hope remained if life were always to be a vain wrestling of blind impulses with wild unsatisfied longings? Humphrey did not dwell upon this last thought; he was too much preoccupied with the wretchedness of the present moment—only it seemed to hedge in this dreary hour with a future as dark as the past.

Suddenly he sprang up, animated by a new idea and a new hope. He groped about till he found a match, then striking it, lighted an end of candle, and began turning out drawers and boxes with renewed activity.

It was Wednesday evening, and one of Mrs. Grey's At Homes. Humphrey felt

almost certain that Ersilia would be there; he knew she went everywhere this winter with Mademoiselle Mathilde; he also felt almost certain that Mr. Fleming would not be there, for he remembered how his master had once said that he always avoided Mrs. Grey's parties. Humphrey himself had some time ago received a card inviting him to these entertainments, but he had never yet been to one, on account, amongst other reasons, of certain deficiencies in his wardrobe which he had neither the ready-money nor the credit to supply. But now it all at once occurred to him that nothing could be easier than to apply in such an emergency to one of his friends, who lived only a few doors off; he was about the same size as himself, and would, Humphrey knew, lend him anything he might want. He would go to him at once, he thought, as, after a useless search amongst his own things, he tumbled them back into their places. Nothing should make him

give up this new hope of seeing Ersilia again that evening.

This friend, who became indeed in after-years one of Randolph's best and most valued friends, but who was at this time hardly more than a friendly acquaintance, was an Englishman of the name of Sterling, a few years older than Humphrey, an artist, like himself, but in comparatively easy circumstances. He had married a young Swiss governess about a twelve-month before, out of compassion, his friends said, and now rented a modest apartment on a third floor in the Rue de Seine. Humphrey found him at work in a small sitting-room, drawing on wood by the light of a shaded lamp, whilst his young wife, with a sleeping infant on her knee, sat knitting by the fire. The lad, with an indifferent air, explained his errand as briefly as he could.

"You are welcome to anything I may have," said the other, "though, upon

my word, I hardly know what I have got; it is so long since I have been to a party. But I will go and look out my things, and then you can come and help yourself."

He left the room, and Humphrey sat looking at this peaceful little interior where his friend lived and worked. Something of tranquil, as it were, immovable repose seemed to pervade it, and struck upon the lad's wild and restless heart. The logs gently hissed and crackled, the babe slumbered, the knitting - needles clicked as the young mother, with swift-moving fingers, sat gazing into the fire. She was pretty, fair, and rather stupid-looking—in fact, she was rather stupid; but Humphrey, as he looked at her, thought dully he should like such a wife as this, not to talk to, not as a companion, but to sit silently, as she was doing now, a placid centre to his home when he should come in out of the cold and wet

of a winter's night. He felt almost sorry, when his friend returning, told him to go to his room, and see if there were anything that could be of use to him.

Humphrey, as we know, was not sensitive in the matter of clothes, and he presently returned, full of gratitude to Sterling, and slightly elated by his own graceful appearance in a coat that no short-sighted person, perhaps, would imagine had been made for anyone but himself. He shook hands cordially with his friends, but Sterling accompanied him out into the little entry, and stood chatting while Humphrey put on his greatcoat. He was a kindly young fellow of four or five-and-twenty, with bright blue eyes, and a most sweet and frank smile.

"How does your picture get on, Randolph?" he said, as he opened the door for him, "some one—I forget who—told me great things of it. I want to come up and see it some afternoon."

"I haven't done much to it lately," said Humphrey, "I'll let you know when it is worth looking at. Good-night, Sterling, and thank you."

He turned away in haste to be gone now, but at that moment another door opened, just opposite; a clatter of plates and dishes made itself heard, a savoury smell came stealing out on the landing. Humphrey had eaten nothing that day but a half-penny roll, more than ten hours before; a sick craving for food such as he had never before known, and which no amount of philosophical reflections, had he been capable of them at that moment, could have wholly counteracted, came over him. He hesitated for a moment, then turned back hastily.

"Sterling," he said, "I am ashamed to trouble you any more, but—could you lend me five francs?"

"Five francs!" said the other, feeling in his pocket, "I would with pleasure,

my dear fellow, but the fact is, at this moment, I have not five francs, nor, I believe, five *sous* in the world. I paid the wood merchant to-day, and it took all our ready cash. I am very sorry—I have a payment due to-morrow, and you can have what you like then, if that is any good to you.”

“Thank you, it is no matter,” said Humphrey rather ruefully, “I can do without.”

He was moving away again, but Sterling laid a hand on his arm and detained him.

“I beg your pardon, Randolph,” he said kindly, and colouring a little, “don’t think me impertinent, but I am afraid you are in trouble of some sort, and—well, I am older than you, and bought my own experience dearly enough a year or so ago. I don’t want to interfere, but if I can be of any use to you—I saw you last night—and on Sunday—”

"Confound it all!" cried Humphrey in a rage, "what the devil do I care what you saw? I am competent to manage my own affairs, I hope."

He rushed downstairs, but was up again before Sterling had time to shut the door.

"I beg your pardon, Sterling," he said, wringing both his hands. "I think you are the best and kindest fellow alive; but I am the most miserable wretch on earth, and I—I have got no home, and when that's the case, it doesn't much matter what becomes of a fellow—," and he was off again before his friend could reply.

Mrs. Grey's parties were always early; from eight to eleven she wrote upon her cards, and for this she had her own reasons to give to her friends. "I do not care about giving late parties," she used to say, "if one has young people to enter-

tain, it is another thing ; in my own young days I delighted in a dance, and when Rose is grown up it will be different. But Charlotte," with a glance at the girl, "does not profess to care about dancing, so that I am free to follow my own tastes, and those of my friends. I love to gather round me the élite of the literary world, and I know what artists, and authors, and—and—artists in short are. They will sit up all night to work ; their happiest moments of inspiration are towards two o'clock in the morning ; but after dinner they enjoy a few hours of repose and recreation. And that is what I endeavour to give them ; music and conversation—nothing more ; some light refreshments, and strong coffee at the end of the evening to prepare them for their after labours."

To do Mrs. Grey justice, her parties were, I believe, always agreeable. She did, as a fact, know a great variety of

people, and she had the art of getting them together. She took care to provide good music and good refreshments, and her rooms were generally well-filled.

Humphrey arrived not long after eight, and the first person he saw was Mademoiselle Mathilde, sitting on a sofa in the little room where he had once had a memorable interview with Charlotte. He was pleased to see her friendly old face there, and went up at once to speak to her.

"It is you, Monsieur Humphrey, is it?" she said; "well, you need not come and talk to me; I have nothing to say to you."

"What have I done, Mademoiselle?" said Humphrey, taken aback.

"What have you done? Why have you never been to see me all this time? I asked you to come, and you have never been near us. No, you need not apologise; you were welcome to stay away if

you liked, but I am an old woman, and I don't expect young men to give themselves airs with me. I am quite in earnest; I am not going to talk to you, and you may go away," and Mademoiselle Mathilde, putting up her fan, began an animated conversation with an old gentleman who was sitting next to her.

Humphrey walked away, sore at heart with this rebuff from his old friend. Every one was against him, the lad thought bitterly, as he passed on into the larger room beyond, to see if a more friendly greeting awaited him there.

He found a great many lights, a heated atmosphere, a throng of strange faces, English and foreign, deft waiters moving about with ices and glasses of coloured sirops, a faint sound of music from an adjoining room audible above the hum of voices. Mrs. Grey came flitting by on the arm of an elderly gentleman.

"I am fortunate enough to possess one

or two gems of my own," Humphrey heard her saying. "A Gainsborough, a Sir Joshua, two Romneys—I must show them to you, Sir John. I call them my passport to the world of art. How do you do, Mr. Randolph, I am delighted to see you here this evening; *when* are we to have that day at the Louvre together? This way, Sir John."

"Do you know who is playing in the next room?" said Humphrey to a red-bearded man standing next to him.

"I am not sure—Signor S——" (a well known violinist) "I believe, and the Princess Zaraikine. But there is such a crowd there is no getting in. The piano ought not to be put in that room; I have told Mrs. Grey so, but she says people as a rule prefer conversation to music. I prefer music myself, when I can get it without being suffocated."

He sauntered off, whilst Humphrey

made his way across the salon, and joined the little throng of black coats gathered round the doorway leading into the music room. The piano was at the further end, and from where he stood he could not see the player, but he thought he recognized Ersilia's touch; on the right hand sat the violinist swaying to and fro over his music. Silent rows of people were seated down the long, narrow room with the look of resignation that is apt to characterise the musical audience of a drawing-room fixed beyond hope of release; knots of men stood about with an air of keen enjoyment, and there was an irregular circle round the piano in the midst of which Humphrey immediately distinguished Mr. Fleming. He was there, then, after all, the lad thought; he was there, though he had felt sure he would not come.

This discovery, which two minutes of rational reflection would have enabled him to foresee, was like a slight shock to

Humphrey; he stood leaning against the doorway with folded arms, but for a moment he neither saw nor heard what was going on, and it was nearly a minute before, looking up, he noticed a little figure standing just within the music-room. She was leaning with her hands pressed back against the wall, and two little satin feet pushed forward, her wide, dark eyes fixed in an abstracted gaze, her yellow silk locks escaping on to her muslin frock. The girl looked so pretty in her unconscious attitude, that Humphrey could not help smiling with involuntary pleasure, and perhaps the smile had a magnetic influence, for in a moment Charlotte turned her head. She smiled and blushed too, when she caught sight of Humphrey, and came pressing through the people to put her little hand in his.

"I am so glad to see you, Mr. Randolph," she said, "I thought you never meant to come to our parties."

"I have been wanting to see you too, Miss Grey," he answered; "but it is of no use calling here, you are never at home. I went to the studio this afternoon, thinking I might perhaps find you there."

"I have not been for a long time," said Charlotte. "The Princess Zaraikine has not been sitting for her portrait lately, you know. Have you not been there either, Mr. Randolph? You look as if you had been working too hard. Aunt Maria says that all artists work too hard—that their brains wear them out. You must not do that, Mr. Randolph." And little Charlotte gave him a kind look out of her dark eyes that Humphrey felt he did not deserve.

"I have not been working at all, Miss Grey," he said; "not in that way. I have been a great deal with your friend lately, and that was why I wanted to see you. I thought you would like to

know that he is much better now ; he hopes to go out in a day or two."

"Yes, I know—" said Charlotte, "at least," she went on blushing and looking down, "I supposed so—you would have told me if he had been worse."

There was a clapping of hands all round them ; the sonata had finished with applause, and the people came crowding out of the music-room. Humphrey stood aside to let them pass, and when he turned to speak to Charlotte again, he found that she had slipped away, and was at the other end of the room. He looked after her puzzled. Was the girl wholly disingenuous, or had she become simply indifferent ? She looked ingenuous, he thought, and yet—it was a problem he could not solve, and indeed the next minute it had passed from his mind. She had disappeared amongst the crowd, and he had gone back to the music-room.

It was nearly empty now pending the

next performance, and Humphrey had no difficulty in seeing Ersilia, who had not yet left her place at the piano. She was sitting a little turned away, talking music, as people who love music are wont to do, with the violinist, whilst Mr. Fleming, with his arms resting on the back of his chair, joined in with an occasional word. He nodded as Humphrey came up, but the others did not notice the lad, who stood on one side listening and looking on. The violinist was an old man of vehement gestures, with a yellow, deeply-lined face, and black eyes of great fire and intelligence. Now and then, as he talked, he struck an impetuous chord, or played a few stammering bars; then as Ersilia caught the meaning, some air grew into clearness on the piano, caught up and rounded into perfect harmony by the fulfilling tones of the violin, till, ceasing abruptly as it had begun, the conversation went on as before. They were talking

Italian; but gestures have an eloquence of their own, and it seemed to Humphrey, who could not understand a word that they said, that no word of their meaning was lost to him.

Presently, however, a Frenchman, coming up, at once changed the language and the conversation. He stood chatting for a few moments, and then claimed the violinist's company elsewhere, on the plea of a prior engagement. The old Italian turned with a profound bow to Ersilia, who, as she rose from the piano, said, "On Friday then, Monsieur, at two o'clock, I may hope to have the pleasure of seeing you."

"Ah, Madame," he said, laying his hand on his heart, and in his imperfect French, "would that every day were Friday, and every hour the hour of two. To play with you is to be possessed with a double soul, a second soul that speaks in harmony with the first, yet is infinitely

above it. I think that so we shall make music in Paradise."

He spoke with an inexpressible earnestness, which took all sense of hyperbole from his words, and imposed a moment's silence on his hearers. Then Ersilia, flushing, and with a sweet and cordial grace that I cannot describe, gave her hand to the old man.

"Thank you," she said; "I know what you mean, though I could not have put it into words, for I too have felt it this evening. I hope we shall often play together."

It was just then that turning round with the flush still on her cheek she saw Humphrey, who had come forward, and was leaning with his arms on the piano. She smiled as though well pleased to see him there, and he was encouraged to make a request.

"Will you play me something before

you go?" he said. "It is long since I have heard you."

"With pleasure," she said, sitting down again at once. "What shall it be?"

"Something that you used to play in the Pyrenees," he said, for indeed some subtle links of association had recalled to him strongly that last evening at the Eaux-Bonnes, when the wax lights shining as now on open folios and ivory keys, on Ersilia in her soft white draperies and yellow lace, had made an enchanted circle from which he had been held apart. She began an air of Mozart's, but she had hardly played three bars when Mr. Fleming, who had gone away, returned and said something in a low voice. She listened with suspended fingers, then rose at once and took up her gloves.

"Will you excuse me, Humphrey?" she said. "It will be for another time. I am wanted just now in the other room."

She moved away, and Humphrey re-

mained standing and looking gloomily at the place where she had been. It was only a trifle; but there are times of physical susceptibility when a pin prick would be torture, and Humphrey was in the tragic mood in which trifles cease to exist, and each separate moment seems fateful. Mrs. Grey's voice in his ear just then seemed about as well timed as the aimless clatter of a child's rattle.

"We are going to have some more music," she said cheerfully; "a young lady singer whom I am anxious to bring forward. I love to encourage talent, Mr. Randolph, where it is possible, but with my limited means it is but little that I can do. The purchase of pictures, for example, is impossible to me, though in that respect indeed I consider myself fortunate. I possess one or two gems of my own, you know—a Gains—— You have seen them, of course, Mr. Randolph?"

Now it so happened that, much as

Randolph had heard of these famous gems of art, he had not seen them, for Mrs. Grey kept them secluded in a small room apart, fearing no doubt that, were they hung in a mere drawing-room or dining-room, they might be looked upon by the uninitiated as simply fine family portraits, and not as Mrs. Grey's passport to the world of art. Humphrey, therefore, was obliged now, however reluctantly, to follow her through crimson curtains into a small crimson-lined room.

"I call this my sanctuary of art, the nucleus of my picture-gallery, if I had one," said Mrs. Grey. "This paper was chosen on purpose; I thought it would show off the pearly tints, and the powdered hair, and—and the pearly tints, in short, that are so much admired, to the best advantage."

"They seem to be very fine paintings," said Humphrey, going from one to another

and examining them. "They are all family portraits, I suppose?"

"My husband's family—yes ; my Rose's ancestors. I hope one day to have her own portrait painted, dear child, and placed amongst them."

"You would hardly have room in here," said Humphrey, glancing round. "Don't you think they would look better in one of your larger rooms, Mrs. Grey? They seem rather crowded here."

"I think not—others have said the same thing, but I think not," Mrs. Grey answered. "You see there is nothing here to distract the attention, no furniture, no china, no books. And that is what I like ; for it is a fault I have sometimes found in the *ateliers* of artists themselves—that there is too much to see, too much to admire. And talking of *ateliers* reminds me, Mr. Randolph, how much, how very much we shall miss Mr. Fleming when he is gone."

"When he is gone?" said Humphrey, staring.

"Yes, when he is gone to Florence, you know. I hear that he is to start almost immediately, and to be absent many months. It is an Englishman, I understand, who has lately built a house—a palace rather—and wishes it decorated in fresco by the first artists of the day. That is the sort of thing that fills me with envy, Mr. Randolph; it is so entirely what I should like myself if I had but the means. Have you quite done here? Shall we return into the other room? I think I hear my young friend singing."

Humphrey mechanically held aside the curtain to let Mrs. Grey pass, and followed her into the music-room. "Ahimé!" sang the young lady, at the top of her voice, with a heart-broken drop on to the key note. "Bravo, bravo!" cried all the people standing round. Humphrey made his way through them all; he had but one

thought now—to find Mademoiselle Mathilde and ascertain from her the truth of what Mrs. Grey had been saying. She would know ; she would tell him everything.

Mademoiselle Mathilde was still sitting where he had left her, but the old gentleman was gone, and the place beside her on the sofa was vacant. She looked up at the lad with a good-humoured twinkle in her old eyes.

“You may come and talk to me now,” she said, “yes, I forgive you, for I see you have put on your best coat on purpose to please me. Where *did* you get that coat, Mr. Humphrey? It looks as if it had been made twenty years ago for somebody else.”

“Don’t, Mademoiselle,” said Humphrey imploringly. He was indifferent to the criticism on his coat, but he was in no mood to joke about anything. “I want you to tell me about Mr. Fleming,” he

said quickly. "Is it true he is going away? He has said nothing about it to me."

"If you paid a little more attention to your work and to your friends, you would know more of what is going on," said Mademoiselle Mathilde, severely; then relenting, "It has only been settled a day or two," she said, "no doubt you would soon have heard of it from Mr. Fleming himself."

"It is true—he told me this afternoon he had some arrangements to make," said Humphrey, confounded, "but I never thought—when does he go, Mademoiselle? I was told almost immediately."

"Not immediately—not for nearly three weeks," said Mademoiselle Mathilde, with some irritation, "there is plenty of time to arrange everything."

"But the marriage—the Princess Zarai-kine—is the marriage postponed?" said

Humphrey confusedly; "it was to have been immediately after Easter."

"Postponed? certainly not, why should it be postponed?" said Mademoiselle Mathilde very crossly. "What do you take me for, Mr. Humphrey? People can be married before Easter as well as after, I suppose; it is not even Lent yet. Why should it be postponed? They have been engaged ever since last September, and that is long enough in all conscience. They will be married before they go, of course. What is Mr. Fleming to do all by himself in Florence? I am much better able to take care of myself than he is, as I tell Ersilia. I have looked after myself for the last fifty years, and can for fifty years more, if necessary. But there is not the slightest occasion for talking about it; the wedding will be an extremely quiet one, and—we will let the subject alone for the present, if you please."

Mademoiselle Mathilde having made this

unconscious revelation of her own inward conflict, got up, and without another word or look walked away into the next room. Humphrey sat as if stunned for a minute, and then he too got up, and walked straight out of the room into the entry where the coats and hats were piled. As he passed along, he saw through a half-open door into an empty room, where a buffet was being prepared for guests who might be supposed to be hungry later on. The lad felt half famished, but he did not dare go in; a wild demon seemed to be leaping at his heart, that he felt might at any moment break forth in ungovernable action. He made his way out quickly. As he went down the stairs, he passed people on their way up; it was still early; he had been there scarcely an hour.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DARK HOUR.

RANDOLPH walked straight into Monsieur Rossel's room on his return from Mrs. Grey's party. He had no fixed purpose in doing so ; but he shrank from the desolation of his own dreary apartment, where a chaos of miserable, distracted thoughts awaited him, and under all the myriad roofs of Paris spreading wide beneath the darkness, this seemed to him the only spot where a lighted hearth and an unquestioning welcome awaited him.

Monsieur Rossel was pacing up and

down the room with his hands behind him, as was his habit now he had regained sufficient strength to move about. He paused in his walk, however, as Humphrey came in.

“You have returned, Randolph,” he said. “I am glad of that, for I have a paper here that I particularly want copied out this evening. Perhaps you could do it for me now; I have been writing all the afternoon, and my hand is too tired to do any more work to-night.”

He seated himself in his arm-chair, and Humphrey, without speaking, took his accustomed place opposite. His fingers moved uncertainly amongst the papers for a moment, then his hands dropped and he sat motionless. Monsieur Rossel, who was turning over a writing-portfolio, looked up, and for the first time noticed the sick whiteness of the lad's face.

“Good Heavens, Randolph, what is the matter?” he said. “Are you ill? Will

you have anything? When did you dine?"

"I have had no dinner," said Humphrey, incapable of more than this simple statement of fact.

"And I have none to offer you—I dined two hours ago. But I can give you a glass of wine in a minute," said Monsieur Rossel, rising stiffly and going to a cupboard by the fireplace. "The excellent wife of the porter insists upon showering bottles of wine upon me," he said, returning, "though she knows I am not allowed to drink any. Have some, my good boy; you look half-dead. What could induce you to go without your dinner?"

He poured out a glass and gave it to the lad, who drank it eagerly, and then another. It revived him; for, exhausted as he already was, he had felt really faint on coming out of the cold into the sudden warmth.

"It is not that," he said, after a minute. "Good Heavens, Monsieur, do you think

I am a girl to care for the loss of my dinner? If it were only that—" he paused for a moment, and then went on rapidly and very excitedly. "I have seen her to-day," he said, "and him too, and I wish I were dead—I wish I were dead. She avoids me, she hardly speaks to me—he makes her avoid me. She spoke coldly to me this afternoon; she never did so before. I would have died sooner than that she should speak and look at me so—and it was his doing. What right has he? I knew her first. I—loved her first. I was happy till he came."

He flung his arms over the back of his chair, and sat so with his face turned away. M. Rossel had taken up the tongs to mend the fire, and did not at once answer.

"You are a fool, Randolph," he said at last, not unkindly, "take some more wine, my good boy, and be a man. You may believe me, for I have seen some-

thing of the world, when I tell you you had much better give up all thoughts of the Princess Zaraikine — except as a cousin and so forth—no possible good can come of anything else; that you may take my word for. When does this marriage take place? Not yet, I think you said?"

"That is all altered," said Humphrey, without moving, "it is to be in less than three weeks."

A heavy log slipped at that moment, and fell spluttering on to the hearth, Humphrey started forward and took the tongs from M. Rossel's hand to replace it.

"Thank you," he said, "my hand is so weak to-night, I can hold nothing. Three weeks do you say? How is that? I thought it was not to be till after Easter."

"Mr. Fleming is going to Italy—to Florence," said Humphrey, "the marriage is to take place before he goes."

He threw himself into his chair again and remained motionless as before, whilst M. Rossel stood silent by the mantel-piece. Presently he gave a short laugh, then another. Humphrey looked round savagely.

"Why do you laugh?" he said, "I see nothing ludicrous in it."

"There is something ludicrous in most things, my dear fellow—except rheumatic gout, perhaps; I never yet could discover a comic side to that. However, you are right enough in one sense; this marriage is no laughing matter—the devil is in it, I believe—I don't know what to do You are an honest lad, Randolph; I have half a mind to trust you—"

He stood looking at him irresolutely for a moment, and then shaking his head, turned away and began walking up and down the room again. Was Humphrey utterly blind? He thought so afterwards on looking back, and yet at the time he

was giddy, confused, exhausted, pre-occupied with his own miseries—no, he does not wonder that he suspected nothing. He sat with his head leaning on his hand, and a thousand intense thoughts flitting through his brain. The wine was before him ; he had not yet had much, but what he had taken had gone at once to his head, as was natural after his hours of fasting, and he was in the state in which every perception seems quickened as the reasoning powers grow confused.

It seemed a long time before M. Rossel came back to his chair and seated himself with the air of a man who has thoroughly made up his mind.

“Randolph,” he said, “listen to me. You are almost the only relation the Princess Zaraikine has in the world, I believe?”

“Well,” said Humphrey staring, “what then?”

“You have her interests at heart?”

"Of course," said the lad, impatiently, "what then?"

"Only this — that, on my word of honour as a gentleman, your cousin's marriage with Mr. Fleming can only be the cause of ultimate misery to her, and that as her only near relation, it should be your part to prevent, or at least delay it."

He spoke with a grave seriousness unusual in him; it impressed Humphrey with the conviction that he was speaking the truth, and he sat confounded.

"What do you mean?" he said at last. "I don't understand—I prevent it? Why should she not marry Mr. Fleming?"

"That is what I will explain; I will lay the facts before you—then you can judge for yourself. Whilst there was no immediate prospect of the marriage, I was silent; much might have happened between this and Easter. But now the case is different. You must forgive me if

I give you pain, Randolph; you have or had an affection for Mr. Fleming, I know, but it is best to be plain with you, and the fact is, there are certain circumstances in his past life with which I happen to be acquainted—”

“In Mr. Fleming’s!” broke in Humphrey, indignantly, and speaking from old habit and impulse, “I don’t believe a word of it. He is the best and noblest of men.”

“That is to say, my good fellow, he paints fine pictures, and has done you some kindness,” said M. Rossel, speaking more in his usual manner; “that, I take it, is about all you know of him?”

Humphrey was silent; what indeed did he know of Mr. Fleming’s past life? He could have only opposed to M. Rossel his own young generous belief in the goodness that had shown itself to him in a thousand ways, and who shall say how

much this had been dimmed by his habit of thought in these last few months ?

"These are qualities, Randolph," M. Rossel continued, "which, however estimable in themselves, go but a little way in social relations with the world at large. I know nothing of Mr. Fleming personally, but from what I have heard of him, I should judge him to have the faults of a weak character, the most fatal perhaps to the happiness of others. You yourself, if I understand you rightly, have found him not incapable of an ungenerous effort to injure you in your cousin's opinion, and alienate her from you."

"It is true," said Humphrey. At another time he would have resented this direct interpretation of his own vague statements ; but now, in his heated brain, his misty grievances had assumed a vivid outline and colouring they had never had before. "It is true," he said passionately, "he came between us at the first, and it has

been so ever since. It was like Paradise till he came. We were together always—in the mountains, in the forests, at home, everywhere. She liked to have me with her, she said so; she liked talking to me, till he came—and then everything was changed, and it was his doing. This very evening—” His voice choked and he was silent for a moment. “And yet I can’t believe it,” he went on, with a sort of angry sob, “I can’t believe any harm of him. I loved him; oh God, I loved him so! I thought he was the best friend I ever had.”

“My good boy,” said M. Rossel, “your love for Mr. Fleming, which does you every honour, can in no way influence—take some more wine; you have not got your colour back yet—I say it can in no way influence your cousin’s future happiness, and it is that which concerns us now. I tell you again solemnly, if you do not in some way interfere to prevent, or

at any rate delay, this marriage, you may repent it for her sake to the end of your days."

Humphrey, who had started up in his agitation, sat down again, looking at M. Rossel in blank bewilderment. He could not reason; he could only meet each proposition as it arose.

"What can I do?" he said helplessly; "if what you say is true, I would do anything—anything in the world to help her. But I can do nothing."

"On the contrary, my dear fellow, you are the only person who can do anything, otherwise I would not have troubled you," answered M. Rossel; then speaking each word with clearness and precision, "You can do this, for instance," he said, "I can dictate to you a plain statement of these facts that have come to my knowledge. You can judge for yourself how far they are likely to affect your cousin's future welfare, and you can then, if you think

proper, send this statement in the form of a letter to the Princess Zaraikine."

"I? Never!" said Humphrey; "she would never speak to me again."

"Possibly not," said M. Rossel, "if she knows from whom it comes; but your name is not essential."

"An anonymous letter, and against Mr. Fleming?" cried the lad, starting up as if he had been stung. "Never, never!"

"As you like, my good fellow. There is a prejudice against anonymous letters, I am aware; a foolish one, it seems to me. It is sometimes highly desirable that information should be given, and equally desirable that the informant should not be known. The present is a case in point. However, do as you like; you can put your name if you think proper."

"No," said Humphrey, "no; I couldn't do that; she would never speak to me again. I might write it," he went on, dreamily, "I might write it, I would do

more than write a letter for her. I needn't send it unless I like." He sat silent for a while; then rousing himself with an effort at independent thought, "What are these facts?" he said, "and if you know them so well, why should you not go yourself to the Princess Zaraikine? That would make more impression on her than a letter."

"My good fellow," said M. Rossel, slightly shrugging his shoulders, "how can I go? You are not ignorant of my position; you are aware that I have reasons for wishing my presence in Paris to be known to as few people as possible. As it is, I run some risk," he said slowly and reflectingly; "but I see no other way—no other way. And the letter will not fail—I think not."

Humphrey did not reply. He had felt a passionate repulsion towards each proposition as M. Rossel made it; but he had lost his hold on the relation of things, and

now, unconsciously to himself, his confused mind was slipping away from the first question, whether the letter should be written at all, and was dwelling on quite secondary considerations. Presently, as though in a dream, he heard Monsieur Rossel speaking, and perhaps he answered him; but when he had struggled back to a clear idea again, it was, so to speak, on an altogether different level.

“When this letter is written,” he said, “how am I to get it to her?”

“By the post, I suppose,” answered M. Rossel, “or stay—it is not late—it might perhaps be safer and quicker for Pierre (the porter’s son) to take it to her house to-night.”

“Why Pierre?” said Humphrey, with a feeling of irritation. “Why should I trust Pierre? Why should I not take it myself?”

“You are known there, are you not?” said M. Rossel. “You might be recog-

nised by the concierge. But you are perhaps right. The post will be safer."

"No," said Humphrey angrily, "I won't have it go by the post. It is not safer; letters get lost by the post. Pierre shall take it. But hadn't you better write it?" he went on after a minute, "she'll recognise my writing,"

"My good boy, I could not write another line to-night to save my life. But you can do what I cannot—not with any success that is—you can write a feigned hand. I know it; for you have done it for me, if you remember."

"Oh yes," said Humphrey miserably, "I can write a feigned hand."

He thought he was standing by the mantelpiece when he spoke, but all at once he seemed to wake up and find that he was seated at the table, with a sheet of paper before him and a pen in his hand. He held it suspended for a moment, then dropped it again. "I can't write now,"

he said ; “ won’t it do to-morrow ? I am tired, stupid, dizzy, I think.”

“ You are tired, of course, through want of food,” said M. Rossel. “ Take some more wine ; that will do you good. It had better be written to-night, if possible.”

Humphrey took up the pen again. What he wrote he could never afterwards remember, never afterwards knew. The words seemed to run in fire from his pen, and fade again into blankness on the page A cold night wind blowing in his face all at once startled and confused him. He was no longer in M. Rossel’s room ; he was standing in the street below, with Pierre, a lad of twelve or fourteen, at his side.

It was through questioning Pierre the next day that Humphrey learnt most of the subsequent events of that evening, Monsieur l’Anglais, as he was generally called, had come downstairs, so the boy reported, about half-past ten, just as he

(Pierre) was going to bed, and had asked him if he would take a message to the other end of the town. Pierre, glad to delay the fated bedtime, agreed to take the letter readily enough. He thought Monsieur l'Anglais looked rather queer; but did not suppose there was anything wrong till they got outside, and then he thought him very queer indeed, the boy said, grinning. He had insisted on coming too, to show Pierre the way—as if Pierre had not known it ever since he was born, so to speak—and taking his arm, had talked without ceasing the whole time, only, as it was all in English, Pierre had not understood a word that he said. Arrived at the Princess Zaraikine's house, Monsieur l'Anglais would not come in, but had placed himself in a doorway nearly opposite, whilst Pierre left the letter, nor would he come away again, the boy declared, for all he could say; so at last he had left him there, and come home by

himself. Humphrey, in fact, remembered stationing himself in the doorway, with some vague notion of waiting there till he should see Ersilia return from Mrs. Grey's party, and perhaps he fell asleep, for it seemed a long time afterwards that he found himself walking dizzily along the quays and across the bridge on his way home. Then, all at once, something—he cannot recall what—startled him into a moment of intense consciousness, of wild exaltation that he can never forget. The weather had changed in these last few hours; a rack of clouds tinged by the moon was being driven across the sky; the snow had ceased, but a freezing wind had arisen, and bound together the last flakes into a thin white crust; the streets were deserted, the lamps flickered as they shone reflected in the river; and to the lad it seemed that all the earth lay still and wind swept and frozen beneath his feet, within his grasp, under those im-

mense hurrying heavens. A sort of wild exaltation, I say, possessed him. What had he been doing? What was he going to do? Something that could change a life, could alter a destiny? He too was not powerless then; he too could control fate, work events, maintain his will. . . .

It was one of those dark moments that seem to verify the tales told of men who have sold their souls to win more than mortal power. But with Randolph, the reaction came the next moment with the freezing blast that swept across the bridge and chilled him through. He hurried home with shivering haste, and for the last time that day mounted what seemed endless flights of stairs to his own room; then, all dressed as he was, he threw himself upon the bed, and drawing the coverings over him, in five minutes he was dead asleep.

CHAPTER IX.

A MEETING IN THE LOUVRE.

HUMPHREY awoke the next morning cold, faint, and sick. A chill daylight came in through frosty panes half choked with snow; it showed him his bare walls, his scanty furniture, his fireless grate where his last log had smouldered into a heap of white ashes three days ago. Last evening's events lay in his memory like a confused dream, nor had he yet the strength to disentangle them. He had a racking headache, his limbs felt benumbed; he tried to rise, and fell back. For a

moment he thought he was going to die there of cold and hunger, with not a soul to help him ; then with a new effort he dragged himself off the bed and got upon his feet.

Once risen he felt stronger. His first movement was to detach from its chain a gold watch that he habitually wore, and making his way downstairs he called to Pierre, who was used to run on his errands of every description.

"Pierre," he said, "take this watch for me and get as much money on it as you can ; and ask your mother if she will bring me up some wood and some coffee, I am not well this morning."

The watch had belonged to his uncle, Mr. Randolph, and had been given to him by Ersilia. Yesterday he had gone without food all day rather than part with her gift ; to-day what did it matter ? His remembrance of last night's events might

be vague, but the sense of recklessness they had engendered was very real.

It was not long before the porter's wife, kindly benefactress to the fleeting population that alighted under the roof, appeared with hot coffee, followed by a boy carrying a load of wood. A fire was soon kindling and blazing; Humphrey was still in his friend's clothes that he had lain down in; but he changed them now for his everyday attire, and by the time Pierre returned with the money, he was sitting, drinking his coffee in front of the fire, and vainly trying to recall all that had happened the night before. He questioned the boy, as I have said, and when Pierre went away he still sat with his aching head in his hand, striving, as his numbed consciousness revived, to supply each missing detail. It was in vain; nothing would come but remembrances such as he has endeavoured to set down, of a confused brain growing more

confused, of speeches that seemed to detach themselves without connecting thought, of a letter of hateful import which, look at it as he would, faded for ever into blankness. What had he written? What miserable lie had he dared to write concerning his master—his master on whose honour and good faith he was ready to stake his life almost? Had it reached Ersilia, and if so, what would happen? Good God! what would happen? What had he done?

Humphrey started up, crossed the passage, and without knocking, walked into the opposite room. Monsieur Rossel was already up, though it was before his usual hour of rising; he was seated at his table writing with as much rapidity as the weakness of his hand would allow.

Humphrey walked straight up to him.

“What did you make me write in that letter last night?” he said, in a voice

hoarse with passionate emotion. "What infernal lies did you make me write?"

M. Rossel glanced up for a moment with keen eyes from his writing. "Have you heard anything of it?" he said.

"Heard? No. What should I have heard? What is there to hear? For God's sake, Monsieur, tell me what was in it, and put me out of this torture."

"My good boy," said M. Rossel, "you have no need to trouble yourself further about the letter or its contents; what was in it is of little importance except to those immediately concerned, and the whole thing, as it happens, may be of no consequence one way or another. We need not speak of it again."

"No consequence?" said Humphrey. "Is an infamous scandal of no consequence? Are lies of no consequence?—lies that may ruin the happiness of two people. And such happiness—" His voice choked.

"My good fellow," said M. Rossel, with some impatience, "you must excuse me if I ask you to leave me for the present. I have received letters of the utmost importance that I must answer at once. As regards the letter you speak of, it was open to you to write it or not, and I am sorry if it is giving you any uneasiness now; but last night you were only eager to have it sent. It was you yourself, as you may remember, who insisted that it should be taken as soon as it was written, when I wished to keep it till to-day."

"No," said Humphrey, "I remember nothing."

"And for the rest," M. Rossel continued, taking up his pen, "I imagined from what you said, that nothing that interfered with the marriage of the Princess Zaraikine would be displeasing to you."

"Not that," said Humphrey, "not that. God knows I never meant that."

He flung his arms against the wall, and stood with his face hidden in speechless despair. There was a few minutes' silence, broken only by the rustling of M. Rossel's papers and the scratching of his pen. Then Humphrey, without another word, turned to leave the room. He thought M. Rossel absorbed in his writing, but half-way to the door he was arrested by his voice.

"Randolph," he said, in tones that betrayed some anxiety, "you will, of course, not mention my name in connection with this affair, whatever may happen. I trust to your honour, as you know, not to reveal my presence in Paris."

"My honour?" said Humphrey, bitterly. "You do well to trust to it when you have done your best to take it from me. But you need not be afraid, you are safe with me." He left the room as he finished speaking, never to enter it again.

He went out into the streets. His

passion was all gone ; he felt nothing but bitter remorse and despair as he walked along with his hands in his pockets, his hat pulled over his eyes. He turned into the first restaurant he came to, and ordered some breakfast ; he could pay for it now with money that to his exaggerated thought seemed the price of his own honour, and when he had done, he still sat at the little table set in a corner of the room, feeling, rather than thinking. He shrank now from dwelling on the thought of last night. M. Rossel's words that had most impressed him then with the weight of conviction, had faded into nothing now. The whole thing was a lie—he no more doubted it than that the sun was in the heavens, and whether M. Rossel had believed it to be true, or whether he had acted as he did from any other motive, Humphrey did not care to consider ; he had enough to do with his own share in that dark hour, towards which all the mad

jealousy and discontent of the last few months seemed to him to have been tending. And yet even that was not what oppressed him most ; it was the thing itself, and the misery that it might have worked that was weighing him down, not that he had done it—that was a bitterness he would taste more fully later on. He had no thought of confession ; he had no thought of action of any kind ; it seemed to him that all action was over, and that he had only to sit and wait until whatever had happened, or was going to happen, should of itself come upon him and crush him. Each moment he expected the blow to fall, in the chance words of the passers-by, in a face looking in at the window, in the footsteps that passed and repassed him as he sat alone at his table ; and then at length he perceived that suspense had become intolerable, and starting up, he went out into the street again.

It was a clear, frosty day ; more snow

had fallen after midnight, and it lay thick and smooth and sparkling everywhere; all Paris was abroad and joyous in the bright sunshine, under the clear blue sky—so it seemed to Humphrey as he crossed the Boulevards, and made his way up the Chaussée d'Antin to the Rue de Clichy. He would go to the studio, he thought; he would go in and know the worst at once; he should be able to read it all in his master's face. But when his foot was on the first step of the staircase his courage failed; a sickening dread came over him, and he turned away.

Where was he to go? What was he to do? How learn the truth that he had no strength to read in the faces of those he loved? Humphrey thought of the doorway of which mention has more than once been made. He had not frequented it lately, but now nothing better suggested itself to him than to go and place himself there once more. Some word, some sign

must surely come, some face appearing at a window, some passing glimpse of Ersilia that would tell him all.

There was an old woman with a charcoal pan for roasting chestnuts who occupied an opposite corner of the doorway to that in which Humphrey generally stood. Her presence there had disturbed him at first; but he had ended by getting accustomed to it, whilst she, on her side, showed from the first a lively interest in his proceedings, and a perfect comprehension of what brought him there. To-day, as he came up, she greeted him with a nod and a look of intelligence.

“*Elle est sortie,*” she said, and then, as he paid no heed, “*elle est sortie,*” she said again, and nodded her head till some customers coming up drew her attention elsewhere.

Humphrey, in fact, heard her without hearing; but presently, as he stood in his dark corner, cold and suspense began to

gain upon him, and her remembered words gave him the courage he would hardly have found otherwise, to cross the road and make inquiries at the house itself. The Princess Zaraikine was not at home, the concierge said; she had gone out almost immediately after the eleven o'clock *déjeuner*. When would she return? Impossible to say. An English lady had breakfasted with her, and they had gone out together. Was Madame la Princesse well? He believed so; he had hardly seen her that morning; she had come downstairs with her veil on, had gone straight to her carriage with the other lady, and they had driven off at once.

The story did not reassure Humphrey, open as he was to every suggestion of alarm. Who could her English friend be? Could she have sent for anyone—— He would not finish the sentence even to himself. It was a thought that maddened

him, and he turned away quickly to escape from it.

All that forenoon he wandered to and fro, with the sense of unreality that belongs to crises in our lives. Twice he went back to the Rue de Clichy, and stood gazing up, but no sign came from the half-shuttered windows. Twice he returned to take up his station in the doorway, and each time the old woman, whom he was beginning to hate for her meaning looks, shook her head as he appeared. Weary at last of this fruitless waiting, he made his way down to the more frequented parts of the town. He walked up and down the Boulevards, he lingered under the arcades of the Rue de Rivoli, under the snow-laden trees in the Tuileries Gardens, miserable and alone. He met no one that he knew, and yet he felt as though each passer by must single him out, as though this deed, which with awful swiftness had bound itself up with

his whole identity, must be an open secret, known to, and yet hidden away from all the world. It is this sense of hateful fellowship with hidden sin, apart from our fellow-men, that makes its first and worst punishment, and herein, I suppose, lies some of the virtue of confession—that by his own acknowledgment a man renounces all connexion with the evil thing, and sets it away from him for ever. But Humphrey, as I have said, had no thought of confession then; he knew of no words that could undo the evil he had done. Only the guilty consciousness oppressed him more and more.

At length, worn out, and wretched with a dull hopelessness that had come as a reaction from his long-sustained suspense, he turned into the Louvre. It was late in the afternoon now, and the shadows were gaining fast upon the sunlit spaces of snow; but he thought he might find here a half-hour's refuge from the crowds and

bustle that distracted him outside. Presently he would resume his wanderings. He made his way down the long, many-windowed rooms, seeing, without noting, each familiar object, till he reached the picture-galleries. He stood for a while looking up at the Wreck of the Medusa, thinking, perhaps, that there might be more fatal wrecks in life than even that—more desperate hearts tossed upon stormier waves; then, passing down the Salle d'Apollon, he entered the Salon Carré. He went in listlessly, as one who knows what he is going to see and cares not at all for it; but all at once his heart stood still, then began to beat. Two ladies were standing together nearly opposite to him on the other side of the room; he could not see their faces, for they were looking at the pictures, but one at least of them he could not mistake. He knew that tall, slender, gracious form in some dark flowing dress; he knew those superb

furs, the gift of a Russian mother-in-law—in a word, he knew Ersilia.

Never in his life, perhaps, did Humphrey dread anything as he dreaded facing Ersilia at that moment; nevertheless, his feet, as of their own accord, began to move, dragging him across the room amongst the easels to the spot where she was standing with her friend. They were looking at Van Eyck's Coronation of the Virgin, and Ersilia was speaking as Humphrey came up.

"I have sometimes thought," she was saying, "that if I ever lost my faith in the existence of a hidden beauty for men to strive after, I should come to renew it at this picture."

"What do you mean, my dear?" said her companion. "You know I do not always see with your eyes."

"Do you not know," she said, "I so often think, in looking round me, of the beauty that lies locked away, as it were,

from almost all of us, till some one comes who can reveal it, and gives us a transfigured world, like this—— But I can imagine that one might forget it under some circumstances, and then, as I say, I should like to learn my faith over again here.” She was silent for a moment, looking at the picture; then taking out her watch, “We must go,” she said, “it is getting late. Charlotte—where is Charlotte?” She turned round as she spoke, and came face to face with Humphrey.

No self-command could have kept the blood from rushing to Humphrey’s face at that moment, and then retreating, leaving a cold, sick sensation that he felt sure must betray itself in his looks. He could not tell whether Ersilia noticed it; he could not raise his eyes to her face, only presently, as though from far off, he heard her voice speaking to him as usual.

“I am glad to have met you, Humphrey,” she said, in her kind tones;

“this is my friend Mrs. Sidney, of whom you have heard me speak.”

Obliged to look up, and take an offered hand, Humphrey saw a lady a few years older than the Princess Zaraikine, shorter and less slender, and plainly dressed in black. She had one of those calm faces, with bright hair and clear, loving eyes, that retain their look of youth far into middle age; but at this time, owing, perhaps, to some premature lines, and the sedate simplicity of her dress, she looked older than she really was. It was a face Humphrey came to know well in after-days, but he hardly noted it now, for as he raised his head he took courage to look at Ersilia. She was pale—yes, she was certainly pale, and her eyes looked heavy, he thought; but in them he could read nothing but the sweet anxiety he had noticed more than once before when she was speaking to him, and they brightened

with a smile as she met his momentary glance.

"Mrs. Sidney is staying in Paris for a few days," she said, "and I have brought her with me to the Louvre, lest she should forget there are such things as pictures in the world."

"You do not care for pictures?" said Humphrey, forced to say something, and turning to Mrs. Sidney.

"Frankly, not so much as for some other things," she answered. "I am always willing to take a lesson though, and do my best to understand them."

"Don't you really understand pictures?" said Charlotte. She had appeared from behind a big easel, and shaken hands with Humphrey, but rather avoided him the lad fancied. "I cannot understand pictures either," she said, "only sometimes I like them, when they have little children in them—like Mr. Randolph's drawings," looking shyly at him.

"You are fond of little children, my dear?" said Mrs. Sidney. "So am I. I have a whole nursery full of them at home, who come every day to be taken care of. When you are next in London you must come with me to see them."

"Yes," said Charlotte, with brightening eyes, "I should like that."

"You must take me to your nursery, too, Frances," said Ersilia smiling, "lest I should forget there are such things as babies in the world." Then turning to Humphrey, and holding out her hand, "We must go now, Humphrey," she said, "we have an appointment at the studio; but I want you to come and see me one day soon. I am going to La Chênaie next week, as you know. Can you come, do you think, before that?"

"Yes," he said, without looking up, "I will come." He shook hands silently with Mrs. Sidney, and as they moved towards

the door he walked on into the next gallery.

He walked on, shaken with a pent up emotion that he felt was making his face rigid and his lips white. Ersilia's words, her sweet unconscious smile, had roused in him a passion of remorse and self-despair such as he had never known before. And yet he felt relieved—yes, as he grew calmer he was conscious of a sense of relief, for the worst that he had dreaded had not come. That brief everyday conversation breaking into the midst of his fears had dispelled them for the time. What had he feared? He could hardly have told; something threatening, dreadful, fatal to the happiness of those he loved. He felt relieved, but there was a weight that grew heavier every moment—the weight that had held his eyes when he would have met Ersilia's glance.

Presently, as it grew dusk, he left the Louvre. The weary day that had seemed

so endless was coming to an end at last. The sun had set red and clear; the moon was rising over the city, which, with its snowy roofs and snowy pavements, its yellow lamps and lights kindling in every window, looked as though built of pure translucent marble—an exquisite dream city, set in the crystalline blue of the winter sky. Humphrey had no heart for the beauty, which oppressed him like a vain longing. He fled from it all, hastening to shut it out in the heat and glare of a cheap restaurant.

He ordered some dinner, but when it presently came he found he could not eat it. A new thought had taken possession of him. What if Ersilia had not yet received the letter, the miserable cause of all this misery? Letters were often delayed or forgotten, and it might be lying in wait for her even now, dependent on the memory of the concierge. Humphrey sprang up at the thought. He might yet

be in time to get possession of it, to destroy it—all would be well, no one would know And then all at once a horror of concealment, of this new sense of dishonour that set him apart from his fellow-men and forbade him to meet Ersilia's eyes, came over him. With an impulse stronger than any that had gone before, he started once more for the Rue de Clichy.

CHAPTER X.

MR. FLEMING'S LOVE STORY.

HUMPHREY did not go straight to the studio. The idea that the letter might have been forgotten still pressed upon him, and in the longing to save Ersilia a moment's pain he went round by her house on the chance of being able to recover it. But the concierge was out, no one else knew or had heard anything about it, and baffled here also, Humphrey went on his way.

All his courage was gone by the time he reached the studio door, and it was only

the resolution that sometimes survives our impulses that gave him strength to go in. Mr. Fleming was at home; he was standing in front of an easel at work on a design, and looked round cheerily as the lad came in.

"Here you are at last, Humphrey," he said, "I have been expecting you all day, my boy; I have a number of things I want to talk to you about. Come and warm yourself first, though; you look half frozen."

He threw another log on the fire and went back to his work, whilst Humphrey, coming up to the fireplace, leaned his folded arms on the mantelpiece and buried his face in them. There was a few minutes' silence, and then he felt Mr. Fleming's hand laid on his shoulder.

"There's something gone wrong, Humphrey," he said; "I've suspected it the last two or three times I have seen you, but I have never had a chance of speaking

to you before. What is the matter? Out with it, my boy, don't be afraid. If you have got yourself into a scrape I'll help you out of it. Do you want money? Have you got into debt? Has anyone got a hold upon you? Only trust me, and I'll set it to rights."

Humphrey raised his head.

"Mr. Fleming," he said, "I don't ask for your help, or your—or anything, except to hear me, and then let me go away and never see you again." He paused for a moment, then with a desperate effort, "Did the Princess Zaraikine get a letter last night?" he said.

"She did get a letter certainly," said Mr. Fleming, in some surprise at the abrupt question. "What of it?"

"I mean a letter—not by the post—that was left for her—that she got when she came home from Mrs. Grey's party," said Humphrey incoherently.

"I know what you mean—a letter that

was left for her by a boy, so the concierge said—and an infamous letter it was. How came you to know anything of it?"

"I—I wrote it," said Humphrey.

Mr. Fleming went back to his easel, and stood drawing for a minute before he answered. "What made you do that, my boy?" he said at last. "If you had been told anything you thought your cousin ought to know, why did you not go to her yourself? An anonymous letter is a shabby, dishonourable sort of thing, whatever its contents may be. I could not imagine who had written it; I never thought of you, Humphrey."

"She—she didn't believe it?" said Humphrey.

"Who? Your cousin? I don't believe she gave it a second thought, nor was it from her, you may be sure, that I heard of it. The way it happened was this. I went home with her after Mrs. Grey's party to fetch a book she had promised to

lend me. The letter was given her as we came in: she thought from the writing it was a note she was expecting about some business of Mademoiselle de Brisac's, and gave it to her to open whilst she went to look for the volume. Mademoiselle de Brisac, in her first indignation at the contents, read it aloud, and handed it over to me. Your cousin returned at that moment; the letter was addressed to her, and I gave it to her of course. She glanced through it, and threw it at once into the fire, and there was an end of it. I do not know that she has thought of it again."

Humphrey could not answer. The miserable futility of the whole thing, apart from all other considerations, struck him for the first time. Mr. Fleming laid down his crayon again, and, coming up to the fireplace, stood considering for a while.

"I don't ask you who your informant was, Humphrey," he said at last, "and I

don't want to know. I was not aware that I had an enemy in the world, and if I have, I am willing he should remain in the obscurity he has been in hitherto. But I should like to tell you the real story, so that, if you ever hear it distorted again, you may know what to answer." Humphrey tried to speak, but the words would not come, and Mr. Fleming went on. "The real facts are simple enough," he said; "it all happened years ago in Rome—not in Paris—when I was a young fellow, not much older than you, Humphrey. Giovanna—for Giovanna was her name, your informant was right upon that point—was a young Roman girl, the sister of one of my models, a great hulking brute of a fellow. She was not a model herself, but I got her to come and sit to me for a Proserpine in a picture I was then painting. She had one of the loveliest faces and loveliest smiles I ever saw—your cousin has something of her look when

she smiles—I noticed it the first minute I saw her; but Giovanna was much younger, hardly sixteen. One day she came to me with red eyes. I asked her what was the matter. She burst into tears, and told me a pitiful history—that she had no parents; that this big brother, who was only a step-brother, and his wife, were the only relations she had in the world; that they beat her and half-starved her, and threatened to turn her out of doors, because she was a burden on them. I comforted her as well as I could, and gave her some good advice, I daresay; it was not much I could do for her. Two nights afterwards I went to dine with a friend at the other side of Rome; it was winter time, and it came on to snow heavily. He asked me to stay. We sat up playing billiards nearly all night, and I did not get home till ten o'clock the next morning. The first person I saw was Giovanna, sitting on the stone staircase

just outside my door. She had been there for hours, and was half-dead with cold. Her brother had wanted to make her do something—she would not tell me what—and, when she had refused, had turned her out of doors in the snowstorm in the middle of the night. She had come to me, poor child, not knowing, she said, where else to go, and had sat there awaiting my return. I made her come in and eat some breakfast, for she was half-starved as well as half-frozen, and then gave her a note that I had written, asking a lady whom I knew well to befriend the poor girl. Giovanna took the note, as she would have done anything I told her, I believe, and the lady, as I felt sure she would, took her in and sheltered her. Before the day was out she had found a place for her in an English family who were about to leave Rome, and who were glad to have a young Italian girl of gentle manners as nursemaid to their children. I saw her once more,

and bade her farewell. I do not say it was not hard to part. Had I been in a position to keep a wife, I daresay I should have married her then and there—and repented it all my life afterwards; but in those days I had hardly a penny in the world I could call my own. So Giovanna went away, and three weeks afterwards the news came that she was dead. She had caught cold on that bitter night when she had sat so long on the staircase; it was increased on her journey, though I am sure all care was taken of her; inflammation of the lungs came on, and she died.”

Mr. Fleming was silent for a minute, then went on in a lighter tone.

“There you have the history of my first love, Humphrey,” he said. “It is an old story now, and how it ever came to be revived, or how it took the shape in which you heard it, I do not know. Several people in Rome were acquainted

with the circumstances at the time, but I have never spoken of it to anyone since, except to your cousin, who had heard all about poor little Giovanna, weeks before your letter reached her."

"Mr. Fleming," said Humphrey, desperately, "nothing can make any difference in what I have done, but I give you my word of honour I don't know one word of what was in that infernal letter. I—I was drunk when I wrote it; I had had nothing to eat all day, and I took some wine, and——" he broke down altogether.

"My poor boy," said Mr. Fleming, laying a kind hand upon his shoulder, "we have not been looking after you enough lately. I take blame to myself."

"Don't pity me, Sir, for God's sake don't pity me," said Humphrey; he hardly knew what he said. He turned away abruptly, and began walking up and

down till he could find voice and strength to go on.

"You take this too much to heart, Humphrey," said Mr. Fleming, kindly, "you did a foolish thing, I need not tell you, and if it had given your cousin any uneasiness I might have found it harder to forgive. As it is, you have done your best to repair it, and no one can do more. Put it out of your mind altogether, my boy; the thing is over now, and no good can come of brooding over it."

"Mr. Fleming," said Humphrey, stopping in front of him, "I think I am the guiltiest wretch alive, and no goodness on your part can make me feel otherwise. I cannot stop here. I could not bear to see—to see her again. You must tell her what I have done, and I will go away, anywhere, I don't care where, so that she may never think of me again."

"There is no need for your cousin to

know anything about it, Humphrey, unless you like," said Mr. Fleming.

"She must know," he answered; "I cannot breathe in the same world with her, and think she does not know me as I am. When I saw her in the Louvre to-day, and she spoke to me in her old way—and I thought she looked pale—and she smiled at me—by Heaven, Sir, if I had had a pistol, I think I should have blown out my brains on the spot, and I could not endure it again. No, tell her everything, and I will never see her again. She will, she must hate me, and I could not bear that either. I will leave Paris to-morrow, to-night, I care little what becomes of me."

"I will tell her, certainly," said Mr. Fleming, "if you have such a strong feeling about it. Perhaps you are right, Humphrey; but there is no reason why you should leave Paris to-night, or to-morrow, or any time. Forgive yourself, my boy,

that is your first duty, and set to your work again with fresh courage."

"I can't," he said, in a stifled voice, "I can't stay here. I kept away from her as long as I could, and when I saw her again yesterday I think it maddened me. Don't you understand? I too——" He could not finish the sentence.

Mr. Fleming's countenance changed. "My poor boy, I do understand now," he said, "but I declare to you I never thought of this before—never. I have been strangely blind and neglectful, strangely blind, indeed; and yet I might have known—poor boy, poor boy!" He took two or three turns up and down the room; Humphrey had never seen him look so concerned.

"I think you are in the right, Humphrey," he said, coming up to him presently, and trying to speak cheerfully; "a thorough change will do more to clear your brains and give you fresh heart again

than anything else. We must think what can be done."

"I must go at once," said Humphrey, "I cannot stop in Paris. To-morrow, next day—as soon as possible."

"You shall go, my boy ; not to-morrow, perhaps, but as soon as we can arrange it," said Mr. Fleming. "I had made other plans," he went on, more slowly and reflecting ; "it was to talk them over with you that I wished to see you to-day. You have heard, I believe, that I am thinking of going to Florence. An old friend of mine, who has lived there for many years, has lately lost his wife, and he has asked me to execute some frescoes in the interior of a small chapel he has had built to her memory. I shall leave Paris in about three weeks, but I do not propose going straight to Florence. There is some business that must be attended to in London, and we shall probably go to La Chênaie for a few days. I expect to be in

Florence about the beginning of March. My idea was, Humphrey, that you should stay here and finish your picture, which you had set your heart on sending to the London Academy—not that I urged that very strongly upon you, as you know,” he said, smiling; “still I was willing you should have your own way in the matter; and then later on, when I should have been glad of your help, you might have joined me at Florence, and got the benefit of studying in the galleries there.”

He paused musing for a minute, whilst Humphrey stood by in silence. This goodness which had taken such detailed thought for his future overpowered him.

“But I see this will not do now,” Mr. Fleming went on. “What you want is a complete change of society and ideas. What do you say to going to Rome for a few months? I know a man who is

going there next week ; he is not a first-rate artist, but that you won't mind ; he is a very good fellow, and would put you in the way of things at the first, if you liked to travel with him. You have still the best part of the season before you, and you would be sure to find friends there."

"Thank you," said Humphrey, "you are very good, only——"

"As to present expenses, and so on," Mr. Fleming continued, "that is my affair, and you need not say a word about it. I shall only be doing you a service, I was not too proud to accept once from your father, and we can, if you like, settle accounts later on. I will look up this man the first thing to-morrow, and then we can arrange matters more in detail. If you think of anything you would like better, you can tell me. Now I am afraid I must go. I have an engagement."

He began putting up his things as he

spoke. Humphrey took up his hat, and prepared to go.

"You are going home?" said Mr. Fleming.

"Yes," he said.

"Well, I will come and see you tomorrow, and in the meantime promise me not to leave Paris or do anything rash. Promise me that, Humphrey."

"I promise," he answered. He turned to go, and Mr. Fleming accompanied him to the door.

"My boy," he said, "I am more sorry for all this trouble than I can tell you—I am indeed."

Humphrey could not speak. He wrung his master's hand in silence, and went away.

CHAPTER XI.

A DAWNING OF HOPE.

HUMPHREY never felt further in his life from forgiving himself than when he walked home that night after his visit to Mr. Fleming. His master's kindness and forgiveness, whilst they filled his heart, had no power to lift the burden that lay there; rather they made it tenfold heavier. As he crossed the bridge, he stood again upon the spot where he had stood the night before, and looked down into the river. His promise to his master

held him, and yet he looked. With shame, remorse, dishonour clinging to him, cut off from friends, from love, from all that had gone to make a sweet familiar life, what remained? For one shuddering moment he gazed down that gulf of hopelessness, and then recoiled. Yes, he could still recoil, and better that than tempt the unknown darkness, where hopelessness might hold him fast, and dishonour cleave to him for ever.

A note was given him as he went in; a gentleman, *un joli blond*, the woman said, had brought it about half an hour before. Humphrey took it upstairs with him to read. It was from Sterling, asking the lad to spend that evening with him. Humphrey could not go, but he never forgot this prompt kindness fulfilling the few friendly words of the previous night. The sense that there still existed for him human friendship and human fellowship that he had neither slighted nor betrayed,

was the first gleam of light that fell upon the darkness of that day.

He lighted his lamp and made up his fire, for that shivering moment on the bridge had left him with a longing for warmth, for the contact of familiar things. But when a cheerful blaze was brightening through the room, he still shivered as he looked round him. With a keen sensitiveness to external objects, Humphrey had also that habit of associating with them thoughts and memories, that enables a man to weave for himself a home in the presence of the barest walls and scantiest furniture. He had grown fond of his large bare room under the sloping roof, where a crackling, simmering fire, a circling lamp, books and papers and easel, had many a time, half unconsciously to himself, given him a soothing welcome in the midst of his troubles. But to-night everything looked strange with a strangeness that was like a haunt-

ing presence; for he had drifted into regions where the silent, peaceful speech of familiar things seems more alien than the babbling of unknown tongues. Nothing can be more oppressive than this sense of alienation, this severing of relationship between a man and his surroundings—as though wrapped in chill mists he should stand, feeling for outstretched hands he cannot find, straining to catch well-known words that for ever die upon the ear. For Humphrey it was a bewildering element of wretchedness added to the hard misery of that dreary hour.

He began to pace up and down the room. Why had Mr. Fleming demanded that promise of him? Why not have let him go at once, as he would have gone, to work his own way if needful, with daily labour through the world? Better a thousand times to be walking along snowy roads on this winter's night to any bourne

known or unknown, beneath the stars, than to remain here alone face to face with his misery. Never to see her again—never And to know that her thoughts must follow him with scorn and reproach for a base deed that he had done He threw open the window and stood leaning out that the keen sting of the frozen air might give him the relief of physical pain. Below him lay the snow-laden roofs stretching one after the other far into the distance—like piled-up mounds, he thought, crushing beneath their cold weight the life and hopes and joy out of a million beating hearts. With a shudder he closed the window and went back into the room. He sat down at the table, and dropping his head on his folded arms ceased the struggle with this nameless misery. There was no gleam of light then; only a thicker darkness settling down.

A knock at the door startled him. He

instinctively sprang up, shouting, "Entrez," but he had not made two steps towards the door, when it was opened from the outside. "May I come in, Humphrey?" said the clear voice he had thought but now never to hear again, and, without waiting for an answer, Ersilia quietly closed the door behind her and came towards him. Humphrey, dazed and bewildered, stood for a moment motionless with his hand on the back of his chair, and in that moment the darkness faded, and in its stead there came, I know not how, a memory of his childhood—of how, as a little fellow, he being naughty one day had, still naughty, sobbed himself to sleep at night, how waking presently in the darkness he had sobbed again for fright and sorrow, till his mother coming in with a candle in her hand, and as it seemed to the half-scared child, a heavenly light upon her face, had forgiven him and comforted him

to sleep again. Something, he thought, of that remembered light was on Ersilia's face now as she came up to him with tenderness and pity in her eyes, a sweet presence of loving womanhood that seemed to fill the room. He turned from her, sinking into his chair again with a deep irrepressible sob.

She sat down beside him at the table.

"Mr. Fleming told me you were unhappy, Humphrey," she said, in tones that were a little tremulous, "I thought I would come and see if I could help you."

"He told you the cause?" said Humphrey, lifting his head for an instant.

"Yes, he told me, and I thought what you would like best, would be to hear from myself that the letter never gave me a moment of uneasiness. I hardly read it; I have already almost forgotten its contents. I *could* not attach any importance to it, you know."

"That makes no difference in what I did," said the lad; "it does not prevent my feeling myself the guiltiest, the most miserable wretch on earth."

"I know," she said; "I know. I have often thought that to do a wrong action that is at variance with all the traditions of our past lives must seem worst of all, that we must feel it more deeply than any other." She paused a moment; Humphrey did not move. "But I don't think others feel it so," she went on in her clear tones; "we know that what we love best in our friends could never have done the evil thing; and that is why I could never associate this with you, Humphrey. In all my memories of you it could never hold a place, for I know that you have nothing in common with such a deed, however you came to commit it this once."

"God bless you for saying so!" he answered. There was a minute's silence, and then he spoke again in broken tones.

"You must not think better of me than I deserve," he said; "you don't know, I could not tell you all . . . for months past I have been mad, I think; if I had not, this could never have been . . . it has been all darkness—you could not understand . . . as though all light, and hope, and aim had gone out of my life, and left it worthless and empty."

She did not answer at once, but Humphrey saw her face change and flush, and her hand, resting on the table, trembled.

"I do know," she said at last, with an effort; "I will not pretend not to understand, but—I do not know how to say it to you, Humphrey—do not think that in the midst of my own great happiness this winter I have had no pain, no self-reproach in thinking of you. That I had done you an intentional wrong you would never think, I know; but—" her lips trembled, she tried in vain to steady her voice, "I never thought to give anyone the pain I

have given you," she said, "and if—if through me your life were marred, if the unhappiness I have caused you were to lead you—to lead you—if you do wrong to yourself, because, however blindly, I have done wrong to you, it will be like a reproach laid upon my soul for ever."

Humphrey started up. She was further above him than ever in her noble self-reproach, but something in the womanly weakness that caused her emotion touched a new chord. He took two or three turns up and down the room, and in that brief moment the old, mad, boyish passion died away with great anguish, and in its place a new and nobler love arose. He came back and stood by the table where she was sitting.

"That reproach shall never be laid on you," he said, in a voice steady indeed, but in which, in spite of his efforts, the pain made itself felt; "it has never been your doing; it has been my own mad-

ness, jealousy, folly from the beginning—but that is over now. I swear that, with God's help, I will never cause you sorrow or trouble again. Only leave me the hope that, after all that has passed, you will still care a little for me and for my work."

"How can I not care for you?" she answered; "there is no one for whom I can have just the same feeling that I have for you. Though we only met once when we were children, you seem to me a part of my childhood, for, like myself, you lived as a child in my old home, and all the sights and sounds that make a sort of rhythm in my memory, and that I must always love better than any others, are part of your life also. To share the same childish memories must always make a strong tie, I think—like that between sister and brother."

She had risen from her seat, and was standing looking at him with eyes full of affectionate pleading, but Humphrey could

not answer; he could not respond to her words—not then. Only a little later, and it became the one happiness of his life that she could so regard him.

“And so with your work,” she went on, “for there also, Humphrey, you seem to me to belong to the beginning of things. For when I came to know you last summer, I began to understand more clearly than I had ever done before how it is that great works such as I had learned to love are accomplished; how a man may give up pleasure and luxury and self-seeking, to pursue a high ideal through life. And if,” she said flushing, and with a noble and tender dignity, “if every day since then I have been more fully learning that lesson of pure devotion to great aims, so that my own life seems ennobled because I can sympathise with one so much nobler, you will not grudge me that happiness, Humphrey; nor can I forget that it was your enthusiasm which first taught me

that possibilities I had dreamt of might be, not dreams but realities."

"You have thought too well of me," he answered, very much moved. "I had—I hope I still have a high ideal; but I have forgotten it lately."

"But you will not any more," she said, earnestly; "for that is what I wanted to say—it always seems to me so sad when noble purposes and single-minded aims like yours fade and die away. People's lives change, and they seem to have no power to hold to their first and purer thought. They weary of their work, or they begin to care for money, and success, and pleasant things. I should be sorry to see you do that, Humphrey; I would have you scorn everything but the highest—like your master."

Her voice sank as she finished speaking, but her words kindled a sudden enthusiasm in the lad's heart. Thoughts, aims, aspirations that had long been dormant,

awoke again. "I will," he said, looking up, "I vow solemnly that I will. I will prove myself not unworthy of you—and of him." There was a mist before his eyes, and he could see nothing clearly; but he felt her hand held out, and his own meeting it in a firm clasp. It was one of those rare moments of human consecration when, through some pure channel, the Divine will seems to touch the heart. Those are blessed to whom one such moment is given in life.

Neither of them spoke for a minute. "I must go," Ersilia said then. She began wrapping her shawl more closely round her, and Humphrey noticed, for the first time, that she was in evening dress.

"The carriage went on with Aunt Mathilde," she said; "but it will have returned by this time, and she will be expecting me."

He went with her to the door, but as his hand was on the lock she paused again.

"You are going away, Humphrey, are you not?" she said.

"Yes, very shortly — to Rome, I believe."

Some words were trembling on her lips, but she checked herself.

"I shall see you again before you go?" was all she said.

"Yes," he answered; "I will come and wish you good-bye."

He opened the door: Mr. Fleming was waiting outside. He had come with Ersilia up the dark and public staircase, and was walking up and down now till she should be ready. To Humphrey it seemed the last touch to all the generous and patient kindness that had gone before.

He stood and watched them going down the stairs together. Once Ersilia turned and looked back at him with a sweet, troubled smile in her eyes, that still pierces him to the heart as he remembers it, for he never saw that look on her face again.

"Be brave, be patient," it seemed to him to say, "God has given me this infinite happiness, but not the less do I suffer in your sufferings." He watched them till a turn of the staircase hid them from sight, and then he went back and sat down by his fire again. Repentance, hope, resolution, keen pain were struggling within him, but over all there was peace. Her presence seemed still to linger in the room like a benediction.

Three days afterwards, as Humphrey was packing up some painting things in preparation for his start for Rome the following night, a note was brought to him. He knew the handwriting, and opened it hastily. There were only a few words.

"Dear Humphrey," (it ran) "can you come to me this afternoon? We are in much trouble.

"ERSILIA."

In two minutes he was out of the house, hurrying along the streets with I know not what foreboding heavy at his heart.

CHAPTER XII.

LAST MOMENTS.

THE first person Humphrey saw was Mademoiselle Mathilde. She was, perhaps, on the look-out for him, for she met him in the entry, and drew him at once into the dining room.

“Well,” she said, “have you heard—have you heard? Would not one say that the last day was come, and the sky about to fall, when people who have been safely dead and buried for a year and more come to life again?”

“For Heaven’s sake, Mademoiselle,

explain yourself," said Humphrey; "I have heard nothing."

"You have not heard that this wretch, this miserable, this good-for-nothing, who calls himself Prince Zaraikine, is not dead at all——"

"Not dead?" said Humphrey.

"Nor been dead, so far as I can make out," said Mademoiselle Mathilde; "can write a letter as well as you or I, and is in Paris at this moment—or was this morning."

"Good God!" said Humphrey. He could not utter another word at first; he walked up and down the room, unable to realise the stupendous blow that had fallen. "But when—how," he said at last, stopping in front of Mademoiselle Mathilde.

"Oh, it is nothing new," she said; "his being alive, I mean. That little chit, Charlotte Grey, has known him for a long time; not as the Prince, of course, but by

some other name—Rouselle, Rossel——”

“No!” cried Humphrey, “not M. Rossel; don’t tell me that, Mademoiselle, don’t tell me that——” He leaned back against the wall, giddy for the moment, as though all his life were changing and shifting into strange and horrible combinations. Mademoiselle Mathilde was fairly frightened at the effect of her words.

“Good Heavens, Mr. Humphrey! what is the matter? What have I said? Take a glass of water.” She was hastening to the sideboard to get one, but Humphrey recovered himself and stopped her.

“There must be some mistake,” he said; “I know M. Rossel, I know him very well; he lives in the same house that I do, and I have seen a great deal of him. It cannot be as you say. He knew Prince Zeraikine—he told me so. He saw him drowned——” But even whilst he spoke, conviction was forcing itself upon him; M. Rossel’s own words, his interest in the

Princess Zاراikine, that letter whose motive he had never cared to seek—

“What does it matter what he said?” answered Mademoiselle Mathilde; “he could not tell the truth if he tried, unless he said a falsehood backwards by mistake. I saw him myself this morning. He is altered, certainly; his hair has turned white, and he wears a beard. If I had passed him in the street, thinking he was dead, I should not have supposed he had come to life again. But there is no mistaking him. I knew his face as well as I knew my brother-in-law’s.”

By degrees Humphrey learnt all that Mademoiselle Mathilde had to tell. It was that little Charlotte Grey, she said, with as much indignation as if the poor child had been responsible for all that had happened, or as if, alas! that the truth should be known, were not the only thing to be desired. Charlotte had been staying with the Princess Zاراikine it ap-

peared; her aunt and cousin had gone into the country for a few days, and she had come to stop from Friday till Monday—had gone home, in fact, only this morning. On the previous night, Ersilia had sat up late reading and writing, and happening to go to her window long after midnight had been surprised to see a light still burning in Charlotte's room, of which the window, looking on to the courtyard, was at right angles with her own. Fearing that the girl might be ill, she made her way softly round, and, being admitted, had found a pitiful state of things indeed; Charlotte not in bed, not undressed even, but sitting on the floor crying her eyes out with a crumpled letter in her hand. At first she would answer none of Ersilia's anxious inquiries—he had told her never to mention him again to the Princess Zaraikine, he would be very angry if she did, so angry that she would never see nor hear from him any more—not that

that would make any difference now—he was going away—he was going away—his letter to tell her so had been brought to her from home that very evening. As she spoke with redoubled sobs, the letter dropped from her hand; Ersilia picked it up. M. Rossel's writing was peculiar, and, as he had once said, difficult to disguise; I do not know that the attempt had been made in this instance; at any rate, as Ersilia's eyes fell upon it she recognised her husband's handwriting.

She made Charlotte tell her everything—all the details that one by one must have destroyed each faint hope as it arose, and then, as Charlotte herself has told me, sat for a long time silent, holding the girl in her arms. When the poor child, in her childish trouble, broke into sobs and tears again, she soothed her with such tender words as she could find, and presently persuading her to undress, sat by her till she fell asleep. Then she went back to

her own room. What passed in the hours that followed, who shall say? When Roberts came in as usual at half-past seven the next morning, she found her mistress's bed unslept in, and herself writing by candlelight in the chill January dawn.

"Roberts," she said, preventing all inquiries, "I want Jean to take this letter to the Rue de Seine by nine o'clock, and to wait for an answer. If you will light my fire and leave me, I will lie down till he returns."

Ersilia's letter to her husband, Humphrey never saw, but Prince Zaraikine's answer afterwards came into his possession.

"Madame," he wrote, "your penetration has not deceived you. The report of my death was a false one, though circumstances obliged me for a time to leave it uncontradicted. Believe me, I appreciate the devotion you show in offering to

share my misfortunes, and respect my secret. Fortunately, I need make no such demands upon your generosity. Letters that I received only this morning confirm a hope I have for some time entertained, and I find that I am at liberty to resume my name without fear of ulterior and unpleasant consequences. Under these circumstances I should, in any case, have done myself the honour of communicating with you before long. I am obliged, immediately to leave Paris ; but I hope soon to have the pleasure of a personal interview.

“ Accept, Madame, the expression, &c.

“ PRINCE ZARAIKINE.”

What had brought about this change in M. Rossel's fortunes? It was only later that Humphrey heard this part of the story, and then perhaps not the whole of it. How Prince Zaraikine had finally escaped drowning, he never learned; that he had

been nearly drowned and his health injured for life by the *mauvais quart d'heure* he had spent in the half-frozen river is certain. For the rest, the facts were very simple. The officer he had shot had not been killed, as he supposed. He had lingered between life and death for some months, and finally recovered; but so completely had Prince Zaraikine disappeared from the world that had known him, that it was again months before a rumour of this fact reached him, and many weeks before, with all the precautions he was obliged to take, he could get the rumour confirmed. In the meantime, death which had spared the young Russian officer, had been busy elsewhere. The Polish Countess had died soon after the son to whom she had sacrificed her lover, and remorse perhaps had led her to make certain statements which, when laid before the Russian Government, had, to some extent, modified their views of Prince

Zaraikine's case. Had the Prince been alive, he would have been free, not indeed to return to Russia, but to pursue his fortune unmolested through all the world beside. The Prince was alive. The one friend to whom he had ventured to confide the fact of his existence, hastened to communicate to him these welcome tidings, and he reappeared.

It was a simple story of tardy and imperfect redress given to a man whose Nemesis, as not unfrequently happens in this world, had come, not as swift-handed Justice, but in the shape of a cruel wrong done to him by another.

It was not until after Ersilia had received her husband's letter that Mademoiselle Mathilde heard anything of what had happened, and then, with the prompt decision and good feeling she could show in emergencies, she started off at once to see Prince Zaraikine. The interview, as Humphrey gathered, was a very short

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The Prince, who was making preparations for his journey, intimated with great politeness his desire that Mademoiselle Mathilde's visit should not be prolonged beyond a few minutes, and with anger, dismay, and sorrow in her heart, she came back to Ersilia.

When all was certain, when no lingering doubt could remain, Ersilia sent to Mr. Fleming. "He came at once," said Mademoiselle Mathilde. "They were together twenty minutes, half-an-hour, an hour—I do not know how long. I did not see him. As soon as he was gone, Ersilia shut herself up in her room, and never stirred for two hours. She has wished him good-bye—it is as if we were all dead or dying. And for that matter, though I have no wish to die more than another, I see very little use in living in a world like this. Everything has happened at the most unlucky time too; it is always so, I have noticed it again and again. People always

die when it is most inconvenient to go into mourning, and here we are in the middle of the season, when Ersilia was beginning to enjoy herself a little for the first time in her life, and I myself, after years of privation—well, it is all over now, and it is of no use to think about it; but I shall never forget that little Charlotte, never.”

“It was not her fault, poor child,” said Humphrey sighing. He had no thoughts to give to Charlotte and her troubles then, but, in any case, he was in no fear of her breaking her heart permanently over her childish affection for a man who had been kind to her, but who was nearly three times her age. “Is Mrs. Sidney still in Paris?” he inquired.

“No, she left this very morning by the early train. I wanted to send after her; I thought she might be some comfort to Ersilia, but she would not hear of it, poor dear child. You know what

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Ersilia is, Mr. Humphrey, when she has made up her mind to a thing, she will go through with it, happen what may. And Heaven only knows what may not happen now that this good-for-nothing, this poltroon, this villain without honour—I wish I were a man,” said Mademoiselle Mathilde suddenly blazing up, “that I might call him by names bad enough—now that he has come back. He spent all her money before, and he may spend it again for anything I know. My brother-in-law, who was a perfect fool about money matters, made I don’t know what idiotic arrangements at her marriage. Well, there is no use in thinking about it; what is coming will come. You had better go and see her, Mr. Humphrey; she has something to say to you; I don’t know what. You will find her in the library.”

Humphrey, with a beating heart, made his way through the drawing-room into

the library. Ersilia was seated at the open bureau, writing, but she looked round as the door opened, and came forward at once to meet him. Her eyes were red, her cheeks colourless. She could not smile.

"It is good of you to come, Humphrey," she said; "have you seen Aunt Mathilde? Have you heard what has happened?"

"Yes, I have heard," he answered.

"That is well—then we need speak no further of it now. I sent for you, Humphrey, to ask you to put off your journey to Rome. Mr. Fleming will be alone, and—it is hard for him."

"I will stay," said Humphrey.

"Thank you, I felt sure you would. I go to La Chênaie to-morrow, as was already arranged. I do not know when I may be in Paris again. Aunt Mathilde is very good; she gives up all her engagements to accompany me."

The door opened again, and Roberts came in with her mistress's out-door things.

"You will forgive my leaving you, Humphrey," she said, "I must see my lawyer this afternoon, and it is already late."

"You had better by far let me come with you, Madam," said Roberts, as she helped her to put on her cloak, "you don't look fit to be going about alone."

"Dear Roberts," she answered, "I would rather be alone. I may be detained some time. I shall do very well."

"Are you sure?" said Humphrey, "can I not help you in any way? Or shall I go now to Mr. Fleming?"

She shook all over at the sudden mention of his name, but controlled herself with an effort.

"I do not know that you will find him

at home," she said with difficulty, "but thank you, Humphrey—yes, it might be well for you to go."

No more was said. What words of his could avail anything? He went downstairs with her, and saw her into the carriage, and then, without re-entering the house, set off for the Rue de Clichy.

Mr. Fleming was not at home. The studio looked deserted. The fire was out; his palette with its sheaf of brushes was lying on the painting table as though he had laid it down in haste when he was called away. A sudden chill struck through Humphrey. How had the shock affected Mr. Fleming? With a temperament so sensitive that he was wont to feel each change in the moral and physical atmosphere around him, as the eye feels each subtle change of light, how had he been affected by such a shock as this? Humphrey both longed

and dreaded to see him, but he could not wait then on the chance of his coming in, perhaps not for hours. There was more than one thing he must do before night. He must see the man with whom he was to have travelled on the morrow ; he must re-engage his room. He would return, he thought, as quickly as he could.

It was getting dusk by the time he reached the Rue de Seine. The door of the room opposite his own was wide open ; the porter's wife was there piling up furniture, opening windows, shaking rugs. M. Rossel was really gone then. Humphrey had never seen him since that morning when he had left him in anger and contempt, and he stood still for a moment now, looking in at the familiar room, with a hundred stinging memories crowding upon him. How was it he had been so blind, so unsuspecting as never to divine the significance of questions, and words,

and circumstances that returned to his mind now charged with meaning? And yet he could not altogether wonder at his own stupidity. We are so accustomed to take the death of our fellow-creatures upon trust, that it would be difficult in any case to shake our belief, without strong reason given, in what is held to be a trustworthy report, and Humphrey had no *à priori* grounds for suspicion. It was, perhaps, more surprising that the truth had not come out long before in some other way; the chance by which an at any rate inevitable disclosure had been anticipated by a few hours only, might have happened any time in the last six months. Had Prince Zaraikine ever really joined a conspiracy, he would, I think, have been the despair of his fellow conspirators; for, though sometimes a suspicious, he can never have been a wisely cautious man; otherwise he would have escaped some troubles that he fell into

through life. In fact, though placed in exceptional circumstances, he was, I suspect, very much like a good many other people—he took life as it came and followed his impulses with a keen eye to immediate results, and not without a certain amount of precaution induced by his peculiar position, but with no very deep prevision of ultimate consequences. He would risk a great deal to gain but little, yet hesitate to risk a little to gain a great deal. So at least it seemed to Randolph afterwards, in thinking over such circumstances as came to his knowledge in the life of a man whom, from first to last, he knew but imperfectly.

It was but a minute he could give now to these reflections. The porter's wife nodded to him as she saw him standing there. M. Rossel had been gone about two hours, she said; he had left orders for his letters to be forwarded to Brussels. And to-morrow night Monsieur would be gone also? No, Monsieur had changed

his mind; he might probably stay on for some time.

He went into his own room, which he had left, how many hours ago? The calamity had been so swift and sudden, the whole attitude of his thoughts was so completely altered, that although it seemed to himself that he had known of it all from the beginning, he could hardly realise it even now. He looked around him with changed eyes. Here also everything was desolate and in confusion, his portmanteau half-filled, his books and portfolios heaped together. He would not stay to set anything in order then; he was only in haste to return to the studio.

He was obliged to go out of his way to call at a shop, and countermand an order. He had executed his commission, and was walking rapidly along a lighted, rattling street, when his attention was caught by a carriage standing at a church door; he thought that he recognised the coachman

for and turned back again after he had passed,
he to satisfy himself. Yes, he was not mis-
The taken, it was the Princess Zaraikine's car-
riage. Was Ersilia within the church
en, then? He had hardly asked himself the
so question, when the door swung back,
ed and a bent old woman with a shaking
m head came out. As in her slow move-
it ments she held the door open, Humphrey
h had a glimpse into the vast interior, with
its dim altar-light and flickering constella-
tions of tapers, and the next moment
Ersilia herself appeared. She looked paler
than before, he thought; there were sharp
lines of suffering on her forehead, her lips
were compressed as with resolute pain.
Was it peace she had come to seek here,
away from all the familiar surroundings
whose sympathy she had, as it were,
claimed in the happiest moments her life
had known? It is not peace that we find
in hours of sharpest pain, only the strength

to wrestle with an ever-deepening sense of anguish until peace is won.

Humphrey held back the swinging door that she might pass out. She showed no surprise at seeing him there, only stood for a moment as though to collect her thoughts.

"I had something to say to you, Humphrey," she said, "will you come home with me?" As he laid his hand on the carriage door, "Let us walk," she said, "it is not far."

It was a clear, frosty evening, with stars shining in a dark sky above the lights, and the people, and the snowy roofs. They walked on quickly and silently; Ersilia did not speak, and to Humphrey all past and future seemed merged for the moment in an intense present. As they turned the corner of the last street, some one joined them. It was Mr. Fleming.

"I saw you go out," he said, in a voice

that Humphrey would not have known to be his; "I have been watching for your return."

She did not answer, but a flush passed over her face, leaving it whiter than before, and her hand resting on Humphrey's arm trembled. In two minutes they were at the house; the *porte cochère* opened, and they all three went in together. A lamp hanging overhead illuminated the dark, roughly paved entry; on one side a cheerful gleam came from the red-curtained glass door of the concierge's lodge. Ersilia took her hand from Humphrey's arm as they entered, and with Mr. Fleming at her side went on to the foot of the staircase. Then she paused.

"We must part here," she said, in a low and clear voice, as though emotion were exhausted, and volition alone remained.

"I shall see you to-morrow," he answered.

"No," she said, "we leave very early in the morning."

There was a minute's silence before he spoke again.

"I cannot leave you so," he said, hoarsely, "I shall come to you at La Chênaie."

"You will not do that!" she said in a changed voice, and raising her eyes to his for the first time; "you promised me you would not."

He did not answer. He took her hands in his, and for a long moment they were both motionless—a moment that seemed measured by the quivering pain in Ersilia's face, as she stood with dilating eyes and parted lips. All at once her face changed; she grew very white, and loosened her hands gently. He held them a moment longer, then letting them drop, "I cannot, God help me, I cannot bear it," he said, leaning back against the wall and covering his face with his hands.

She stood still for a moment as he had left her, then pressing her hands together as with irrepressible anguish, she gathered up her dress and began to ascend the stairs. Humphrey, who had lingered irresolute, approached, but she only shook her head, and pointing with a mute gesture to Mr. Fleming passed on. In a minute Mr. Fleming, too, roused himself, and moved towards the door. He never saw Humphrey, he never looked back; the *porte cochère* closed behind him with a bang that echoed through the silent courtyard, and then Humphrey following, saw him walking slowly homewards, with a head bowed as though twenty years had passed over it that day.

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